Reading Between Lines

言外之意

*How young Chinese navigate and evaluate political news online*

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Master’s Thesis in Chinese Society and Politics
KIN4593 (30 credits)
Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages

UNIVERSITY OF OSLO
Spring 2017
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Trykk: Reprosentralen, Universitetet i Oslo.
Abstract

Media is an important aspect of life for most people, not the least for young Chinese. The amount of information available in the media, the variety of sources, the timeliness of information, as well as the reach of it have all proliferated in recent years. How are Chinese citizens engaging with the information they encounter in this new and increasingly fragmented media environment? Are they passively receiving it, or rather, actively approaching it? How do they decide what they can trust and not? Through presenting a group of respondents with two examples of politically related media texts - one official media news report and one oppositional blog entry, this study explores audience reception and practices in perceiving and interpreting media messages. The study builds on previous research by Stockmann (2011; 2013), Toephl (2013; 2014) and Nathan (1985), but argues that a new theoretical framework – a model of critical media literacy, is more suitable to describe the differences in how individuals access, understand and apply information they collect in the media.

This study argues that patterns of trust and distrust are linked to each respondent’s consumption pattern and consequent level of critical media literacy. Those with a limited level of critical media literacy, the least experienced and disinterested readers, have a more indifferent and passive attitude toward information, and are more trusting of official media sources. Those with higher levels of critical media literacy, the most experienced and attentive readers, are more actively looking for and engaging with information in the media. They read news every day, and this frequent exposure gives them a keener eye for identifying the framing and motives in the messages they read. They access a wider variety of sources, also foreign ones, and have a more practical approach to the information they encounter. Further, findings in this study show that young Chinese are getting increasingly annoyed and disapproving of reporting trends in commercial media and social media, but that this distrust leads them to consume media differently. While the inexperienced readers turn to official media, the more experienced readers turn to foreign media.

Overall, recipient variables - each individual’s level of interest in reading news, as well as the frequency of exposure, is found to be the most defining factor for how efficiently respondents are able to navigate and evaluate political media messages online.
Acknowledgements

How does a person from a town with two thousand people, and from a country with five million, end up living in a city with nine million, in a country with one and a half billion? Ask the younger me, and I would have just laughed. Life takes unexpected turns, and many years later here I am, finishing my master thesis in Chinese Society and Politics. I could not have been happier with this choice. Not because it was the right one, but because I have been doing something I love. I suspect I will devote a lifetime to you, China.

Several people deserve attention for their helpful contribution during this process. First of all, my gratitude goes out to my supervisor Anna Ahlers, which has been a great support, and has guided me through the process of transforming an initial idea into a doable research project. You have helped me keep on track and prevented me from losing hope. I admire your achievements, and strive to meet the same high standards of quality in my own research. I also want to acknowledge the larger UiO and IKOS community. It was the people there that sparked my interest for China, and to be surrounded by such vast knowledge and enthusiasm for China has been truly inspiring.

A special thanks is in place to my supervisor at Zhejiang University, professor Lin Ka. Thank you for your constructive feedback, for your expertise, and for always taking me seriously in our discussions. Zhejiang University has been a great place to be, and I have had the chance to meet and interact with a diverse group of open-minded and knowledgeable people here. It has been an invaluable experience.

I am grateful to my fellow students and friends, both in China and in Norway, for being there for me, both socially and academically. I think you are all very niu-B. A particular 谢谢 goes to Henrik Nykvist, for our many talks and for your infinite insights provided through the wonderful voice messaging function on Wechat, and for giving me feedback on draft versions of this thesis.

Last but not least, my parents have taught me to find my own path in life, and to always be brave and bold. Knowledge is not only found in books, and because of them I know the value of being practical. Love you, always.
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1 Introduction

In recent times, terms such as *fake news* and *alternative facts* have become widespread, almost fashion words. Yet, this is not something new, as the practice of it has existed through ages, in many forms. It involves a deliberate spread of misinformation, a fabrication or twisting of information, with the intention and purpose to mislead in order to gain either financially or politically. A troubling aspect of it is that people can construct their own reality, for themselves and for others to believe, and that transparency and fact-orientation might not necessarily count as the foundation for decision-making. Nowadays, “everyone” has heard about these terms - also in China. However, what does it imply for ordinary Chinese people? How are Chinese citizens navigating and evaluating the dissonant streams of information available to them online? How do they decide what they can trust and not?

Reading news online is an important part of daily life for many Chinese, and in fact, a statistical report from the Chinese Internet Network Information Center show that 89.1 percent of Chinese university students read online news, the second most popular Internet activity after instant messaging (CNNIC 2016). The amount of information available, the variety of sources, the timeliness of information, as well as the reach of it have all proliferated in China in recent years. Today there are multiple channels, forums and platforms for people to read and share information, and technical innovation has brought new influences on people’s news reading habits. In particular, social media and mobile apps provide a constant stream of news stories from friends as well as strangers, and are perhaps creating an expectation that the news will be provided automatically, regardless of whether one is actively looking for it or not.

However, people are not solely exposed to the messages, they also need to personally decode and construct meaning out of the information they receive from the media. Few studies have investigated how the Chinese audience is actually making sense of messages in the new and more fragmented media environment. How are Chinese citizens engaging with the information they encounter? Are they passively receiving it, or rather, actively approaching it? What stocks of knowledge do they apply in their judgments? How much do they believe in or trust the different sources, and how do they distinguish between the “fake” and the
“real”? These are questions that have barely been raised in the academic literature to date, especially in the Chinese context.

Audience research in authoritarian regimes has been limited, and inevitably study only small fractions of this broad topic. Thus, not much is known about patterns of media consumption in China, at least from a qualitative perspective. Previous research is scattered in time and space, but the ones that exist have provided valuable insight and inspiration to this thesis. In particular, this study builds on a recent study on how Russian youth are decoding news by Florian Toephl (2013; 2014), as well as a study Andrew Nathan in 1985 on Chinese media’s role in forming the public’s views (1985). Toephl conducted a case study where he provided the respondents with two diverse media texts, and he then assessed the stocks of knowledge needed by the respondents in order to make sense of the diverse messages. Nathan, on the other hand, studied the media reading habits of a group of Chinese émigrés, and how effectively the media had reached and influenced their knowledge of and attitudes toward politics.

Both Toephl and Nathan placed their respondents in categories based on how the they decoded or positioned themselves in relation to the messages, as either in acceptance of, as skeptical of or in opposition to it. However, in this study it is argued that a position toward a message is not sufficient to determine the degree of which an individual is efficiently evaluating a media message. In order to explain the differences in how able citizens are at this, insight into how they deal with and process the information provided is needed. In other words, an understanding of how they reach their conclusions. Thus, a theoretical framework that takes into account how individuals access, understand and apply information they collect in the media, is needed. In this study, it is argued that models of critical media literacy are suitable for this purpose, as an adequate way of combining empirical findings and theory.

A few additional aspects are worth mentioning at this point, as they help point out the specific direction of this study. As indicated in the first paragraph, how citizens evaluate dissonant types of political information, and what kind of information they trust or distrust, is an important aspect of this study. A third study serves as an important backdrop in this regard. In her study of Beijing citizens’ news media use during the anti-Japanese protest in 2005, Daniela Stockmann examined the way people used, preferred and perceived of different media during normal times and during a crisis (Stockmann 2010). She concluded
that perceptions of source credibility and expertise were essential for which types of media sources people chose and trusted, and that when people wanted to get “the real” news they preferred commercial media over official media. On the contrary, Andrew Nathan predicted the exact opposite, expecting that if official media were able to present an increasingly complex and accurate view of the world, more people would trust these messages to be credible and true interpretations and accounts of the issues reported on, while still being aware that the media was a centrally coordinated instrument of persuasion (Nathan 1985: ch.91).

What is the case for young Chinese citizens today? How do they decide what they can trust and not? The approach in this study has been to study how a limited Chinese audience (the young, urban and educated) react to and evaluate two specific online articles. First, a news report from official media, and second, an independent blog post, both related to the South China Sea dispute, which serves as a case. Through presenting the respondents with two examples of politically related media texts, audience reception and practices in perceiving and interpreting media messages are explored. The analysis is based on findings from twenty-two interviews with Chinese university students in Hangzhou.

Linking the empirical findings with the theoretical framework, this study argues that patterns of trust and distrust – how credible different sources are seen to be, are linked to each respondent’s consumption pattern and level of critical media literacy. Recipient variables - an individual’s level of interest in reading news general and in keeping informed on specific topic in particular, as well as the frequency of exposure, is the most defining factor for how able a person is at efficiently navigate and evaluate political media messages online. Those with low levels of media literacy, those with the least reading experience and the least interest, are more passive and indifferent in their reading habits, but agree more strongly with the representations in official media. Individuals with high levels of media literacy, those who have a lot of experience reading and also take a deeper interest in political and social issues, have a clearer idea about which sources they prefer, but also read a wider range of them. However, it can not be taken for granted that people have a conscious approach to how they assess the information they are presented with or how they really perceive of a source. A

1 The electronic version of this book used for reference in this thesis did not include page numbers. Thus, the book chapters will be referred to.
great number of people are more or less indifferent to the media messages they encounter – they will neither agree nor oppose.

1.1 Research questions

The objective of this study is to gain understanding about how young Chinese make sense of political news online within the context of an authoritarian one-party state, through examining the respondents’ reading habits and stocks of knowledge about the media landscape. How aware are respondents about the framework Chinese media operate within, and does that influence how they evaluate what they read? Thus, the following two research questions have been derived:

(1) How do young Chinese citizens consume news media?

(2) When interpreting and evaluating the reporting of political media messages, what characterizes the respondents meaning-making process? What influences how they understand and make sense of media messages?

The answers to these questions provide the empirical contribution of this study, and will in turn be linked to the theoretical framework applied to the study. Through this combination of theory and empirical findings, this research might be a humble contribution to an increased understanding of the complex relationship between media and the audience in China.

1.2 Key terms and concepts

Words have meaning, and words have power, that is why it is so important to be aware of the words one chooses to use. Thus, in the following section two key terms applied in this thesis will be discussed: “political” and “critical”.

1.2.1 “Political”

What is political, and what is the relation between politics and media? First of all, it is essential to define what is actually being studied: Is it the way people make sense of political issues and political complexity, or how they make sense of the media? The understanding of the term political that is applied in this thesis goes beyond practices that are limited to formal,
political institutions. The media has become the predominant place for communication in a society - in other words, a space where politics unfold (Castells 2007: 315). Moreover, any political issue is fundamentally framed in the media: In its substance, organization, process, and leadership (ibid 1997: 137-138). Politics are connected to the way people organize and control meaning, produce identities as well as antagonisms (Sæther 2008a: 4). How a political issue is framed in a media text, through choices about what to include and exclude, therefore undeniably influence how people make sense of that issue. Hence, in order to fully make sense of the political world and the messages within it, one needs to be aware of how they might be constructed. Moreover, it is important to note that almost anything could be political, and what politics really is, involves and implies is a longer debate (Ryan 2012). In this thesis, politics is referred to as a process of making decisions that are collectively binding within a certain political entity, and involves activities associated with the governance of that entity.

Why chose something political? It is intriguing to study how people make sense of political media texts in China because of the intimate relation between the state and the media. In any country, the media is a channel of communication, influence, and persuasion. The media serves as a platform where political forces and personalities, as well as pressure groups, try to either undermine each other or advance their own personal or political agendas (Castells 1997: 313-320). Even though Chinese media today is more free and diverse, the government still wields great power in shaping the general public discourse, especially when it comes to political issues. Since this study is a case study of young Chinese citizens’ levels of critical media literacy, a topic with several “sides” was needed, in order to differentiate between different constructions and representations in the texts. Such a study is not necessarily limited to political issues, and it is not limited to the case that has been chosen either. The choice to use this particular case, and to use politically related media texts in general, was also a personal choice. This is a case and a topic that the researcher has interest in and knowledge about, and it was chosen also because of this practicality.

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2 For a broader theoretical discussion on how the media influences various organizations in society, see for instance Hjarvard 2013.

3 A further discussion on the case and its implications will follow in the methodology chapter.
1.2.2 “Critical”

What does it mean to be critical, or to critically assess a piece of information? This term is discussed here as to establish the more neutral use of it. An important detail in this thesis is that critical does not necessarily imply having a “oppositional”, “negative” or “dissatisfied” outlook or attitude. The use of the term has implications for what the research in this thesis is about. In much previous research, many of these terms have been used interchangeably, but have also perhaps been more about how respondents position themselves politically. That is not what is being done in this study. There are no right and wrong answers as long as one can argue well and provide evidence for the conclusions made. This is also at the core of this thesis’ topic; critical assessment as an approach towards information - the way information is sought and treated, not necessarily a person’s opinion on it (Paul and Elder 2008). Thus, the categories later used to characterize the respondents’ critical media literacy are not so much positions taken when reading and evaluating texts, whether people agree or disagree with the messages. Rather, it is how they come to that conclusion, the process of giving meaning.

What it implies in a media context will be further discussed in the theoretical chapter, but in a more general sense, critical assessment sums down to the ability to efficiently gather information, recognize problems and the existence (or non-existence) of logical relationships, evaluate arguments and locate evidence, to comprehend and use language with accuracy, and to put to test the conclusions at which one arrives (Glaser 1941). In other words, the persistent effort to examine information in the light of the evidence provided. Moreover, it is not the same as the mere acquisition of information alone, because critical assessment involves a particular way of processing and handling the information collected (ibid 1941).

Critical thinking can sometimes be seen as synonymous with rational thinking. However, neither critical nor rational thinking is ever universal in any person. Everyone is subject to episodes of undisciplined or “irrational” thought, and “nobody is a critical thinker through-and-through, but only such-and-such, with such-and-such insights and blind spots, and with

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4 For this interpretation, see for example Norris (1999).
5 For instance, in Toepfl’s study (2013; 2014) the word oppositional is applied. See also Wang and Yu (2016) and Norris (1999).
such-and-such tendencies towards self-delusion” (Paul & Elder 2008). The quality of critical thinking is therefore dependent on the depth of experience each individual possesses in each given situation. Moreover, including emotions in one’s judgments might even be an essential and necessary part of making well-reasoned decisions (Miller 2011: 575-579). People may differ greatly both in how they are affected by the same social influences and in their capacity to respond to different kinds of information. As information is encountered, it is processed and placed in a person’s own mental network of associations and connections. Interest and attention encourage information exposure, which again facilitate engagement and understanding. As more and more concepts become linked together, understanding of a certain object deepens and individuals are better able to engage with new information (ibid 2011).

1.3 Media in China: An Overview

In this section, a general outline of the media landscape in China will be presented, and serve as a backdrop for the study. Media in China is in constant change, and so are the relationships between state, market, media, and audience. This is a study “from the bottom up” – but to understand the audience’s meaning-making process, it is also important to be aware of how people might be influenced “from the top down”. The focus in this study is not on how the government or other actors might utilize or control media. However, in order to understand why respondents might answer as they do, think as they do, and evaluate the case articles as they do, it is essential to be aware of the media context they are socialized in. This section will thus address (1) Chinese citizens’ access to internet media, (2) implications of and trends in media commercialization and new Internet media, (3) the relationship between state and media, and finally (4) patterns of Chinese media consumption. Not a lot is known about patterns of Chinese media consumption, but findings from previous research will be presented and lay the foundation for a discussion in the analysis chapter.

In China, one could differentiate between three different media spheres. First, there is official media, sponsored by the state and which are loyal to the regime. This sphere consists of state-controlled and sponsored TV channels, radio channels, newspapers and internet news sites. Main examples are the CCTV channels, China Daily, and the Global Times (the source of the

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7 For a broader discussion on characteristics of information processing, see for instance Zaller 1992; Marcus & MacKuen 1993; Popkin 1991; Sniderman et al. 1991; Taber and Lodge 2006.
first case article in this study). Second, there are mainstream commercial media, which is more dependent on sales to survive. This sphere also includes newspapers, TV-channels, internet news sites and so on. In this sphere, reports might be slightly critical of, but largely loyal to, the political leadership. Third, there is social media and independent internet media, which include blogs, independent news sites and video channels. This media sphere is more fragmented, more pluralistic, and includes a wider range of voices. It is more individualized and sometimes include anonymous and/or non-professional media producers. However, with the new Cybersecurity Law of China coming into effect from 1 June this year, there might be serious restrictions on this media sphere’s ability to publish and circulate news, even though the enforcement ability of the law has been questioned

1.3.1 Media access
At the base of any further exploration of media environment is the question of access. Who has access, and how is this access utilized? This thesis is focused on digital and online media, and does not include printed newspapers, magazines, television or radio. Internet media is getting more widespread all over the world, also in China, and especially among the young. According to reports by CNNIC, 731 million Chinese citizens were Internet users as of December 2016, which accounts for 53.2 percent of the whole population. However, Chinese internet users are disproportionately young, with over 60 percent of them under the age of twenty-five. Among this group of citizens, 85.3 percent are internet users, a number much higher than the population average, and which resonates closer to numbers in Western, developed countries. Then what do Chinese citizens do online? Reading news is the second most frequently used online service, after instant messaging. In the general population, only

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8 For more information on the Cybersecurity Law of China, read for instance KMPG (2017) or China Law Translate (2017). Links to be found in bibliography.

9 Moreover, the analysis is limited to literary texts, as opposed to visual or graphic ones.

10 The internet population is also relatively well educated, with more than 40 percent holding college or university degrees. There is also a stark difference between rural and urban areas, with only 27.6% of internet users from rural areas (CNNIC 2016; 2017a; 2017b).

11 According to 2016 World Bank data, 88.5% of US citizens were internet users, and 81% read at least some news online. 79.5% of the EU population were internet users (World Bank Data 2016).
42 percent report to read news online, while a whole of 89.1 percent of Chinese university students report to do so\(^\text{12}\) (CNNIC 2016; CNNIC 2017a; CNNIC 2017b).

1.3.2 Media commercialization

Since the reform and opening up period started after 1978, Chinese media outlets have been gradually deregulated, commercialized and (partially) privatized. As a result of the growing diversification and competition for customers and advertisements, Chinese media outlets have become more in sync with the interests of their audiences. This development has led to more entertaining, readable, and practically useful content, and access to news about popular culture, science and technology, and sports are widely available. A major characteristic of the current media situation is that it is no longer solely a one-way communication channel. The rise of blogging, instant messaging and social networking services such as Wechat and Weibo have given Chinese citizens, particularly the younger and urban crowd, means to rapidly learn about events inside and outside China, and to disseminate and exchange commentaries and opinions in larger forums (Shirk 2011:13; Yang, Tang, Wang et. al. 2014). Information flows much more unfiltered, and is more pluralistic and fragmented, with less distinction between who is a transmitter and who is a receiver. The internet allows individuals to become the media themselves (Lee & Wang 2016:13).

Journalists have also gained greater autonomy for news reporting, which has made more problem-oriented, critical media reports possible and available. For instance, stories relating to governance, corruption, violence, grievances, environmental protection, public health, judicial reform, and natural disasters, are issues that not many years ago were almost complete “no-go” topics in the media. However, the internet is often the first place news appears, and if it attracts attention there, the audience-seeking commercial media are more likely to pick up on it as well\(^\text{13}\). The information explosion has raised people’s expectations about how much information they are entitled to receive. Through reporting on such issues, the media has been able to mediate the interests of the people in a way that the government

\(^{12}\) Moreover, they use the Internet for: search engines 93.1%, chatting 98.3%, Weibo 61.9%, email 67.1%, forums 30.5%, music 88.9%, games 66.1%, video streaming 89.4%, literature 55.8% (CNNIC 2016).

\(^{13}\) For instance, internet vigilantism called “human flesh search engine”, where netizens investigate into a perceived wrongdoing by an individual or an institution. Often these stories spill over in ordinary media, and put public pressure on the authorities. See for instance Shirk 2011: 28.
can and must, at least in some cases, take into account\textsuperscript{14}. Media also serve as an important intelligence service to the leadership on the public’s feelings and behavior and the performance of lower-level officials (Stockmann 2013:254-261; Shirk 2011:16 - 28). In a speech from 1948, Liu Shaoqi illustrates how the government relies on the media in a way that still gives resonance today: “The party doesn’t fear anything, except for one thing. We never feared American imperialism or the atomic bomb. We only fear becoming divorced from the masses. The center relies on the media as an instrument to keep in touch with the masses” (Nathan 1985; ch.9).

1.3.3 Media control

This part explores the relationship between the state and media. Even though the media has become more diverse, information still does not necessarily flow entirely free, as the government continues to monitor, censor, and manufacture media content, also on the Internet\textsuperscript{15,16}. The Chinese media has thus not abandoned its political role, but instead accumulated additional roles, simultaneously acting as a mouthpiece of the party-state, a market economic media business, and an investigative social actor (Shirk 2011:2-3; Sæther 2008b). In practice, however, the different aspects are not equally put into force. CCP’s Central Propaganda Department still gives directions on what (not) to report on and how it should be done. During the 1990s, official media was required to restrict the amount of “negative” articles to maximum 20 percent, with the remaining 80 percent was to consist of “positive” ones (Sæther 2008a: 171). Throughout the 2000s this distinction became more blurred, and while it is unclear whether it is still a guideline media has to follow today, it can be argued that restriction and censorship have become more implicit and self-imposed. While media today is freer, there are unspoken rules guiding media producers and which create bias

\textsuperscript{14} For discussions on how the rise of the internet and social media communication has impacted politics in authoritarian regimes and in China, see Lei 2011; Nisbet, Pearce, & Stoycheff 2012; Norris 2011; Shirk 2011, Stockmann 2013.

\textsuperscript{15} According to Freedom House, China ranks 87 when it comes to freedom of press, and 88 on Internet freedom, on a scale from 1 to 100 with 100 being the worst (Freedom House 2016).

\textsuperscript{16} As a way to neutralize online critics the government uses a system of paid Internet commentators called the Fifty-Cent Army (五毛党), where individuals are paid fifty cents for each message endorsing the government’s position on controversial issues. This has also had the unfortunate consequence that some citizens hesitate to make positive comments, as they do not want to be mistaken as the Fifty-Cent Army (Shirk 2011:14).
Self-censorship might pertain to all media producers, journalists as well as normal citizens. Posting one’s opinions online carries danger that one will be labeled as a potential troublemaker, so people with higher positions concerned about their own careers are more cautious about making their views known in public, especially when it comes to political or sensitive issues (Shirk 2011:27).

Managing information and news is a fundamental characteristic of authoritarianism, and for “good” reasons. Scholars have found that in places where media content is monopolized by the state there is higher (political) support for state institutions and state controlled media. For instance, Kennedy (2009) examined the interactive effect of education level and media consumption in China, and found that compared to the uneducated, the moderately educated people tend to support the official institutions because they have greater exposure to political information provided by state-controlled media. The most highly educated people, however, tend to be more critical of official institutions, as they do not passively accept official information (Kennedy 2009). The highly educated and urban citizens are those might be the most frustrated by the government’s control, as they are hindered from accessing necessary resources in their work or study, for instance Google (Scholar) and various other academic articles and resources. Thus, many of these have ways to “climb” the Great Firewall through the use of VPN. Nonetheless, because of the speed and numbers on the internet, complete control is impossible. If one is motivated to search for it, most content can be found on the Chinese web (Qiang 2011: 204-221).

1.3.4 Media consumption

How do citizens engage with different information sources in China? This part will deal with previous research on how Chinese citizens navigate media sources and messages. Daniela Stockmann is an influential scholar that has done much research on Chinese media and media consumption patterns in China. In a quantitative study of Beijing citizens’ news media use during the anti-Japanese protest in 2005, Stockmann compared the way people used, preferred and perceived of different media during normal times and during a crisis. Stockmann discovered that during a crisis, people are more actively looking for places to find credible information. When official media are restrictive in their reports, and try to homogenize coverage, people are more likely to abandon these official sources and turn to the commercial media and the Internet for credible “real news”. Yet despite their lower levels
of credibility, official sources remain useful for individuals who need or want to get information about the government’s current position. Stockmann found that attentive citizens are more resistant to political messages and are not easily manipulated, even though they are readers of official media. If an issue is important to them, they filter government messages and decipher the coded language of the official media by reading between the lines (Stockmann 2010; 2011:198; 2013:12-13).

Stockmann’s research suggests that access affects patterns of consumption, but not necessarily the credibility of media sources. High consumption of official media does not necessarily imply that citizens believe what they read there. Moreover, from an audience perspective, the information environment in China is often very disorderly, with a great deal of misinformation circulating (Huang 2015). What kind of information people are exposed to and come across in their daily lives contains a considerable degree of randomness, and the bits and pieces of information they pick up form their perceptions and evaluations. Such perceptions and evaluations are mostly based on second-hand information from the media, internet and other personal sources. Rumors also play a great deal, and those who feel alienated from the media, for various reasons, are more likely to rely on rumors (Huang 2015: 2-8; Stockmann 2011:178-180).

Further, in her research on how media experts perceive different kinds of newspapers, Stockmann found that judgments are made on the basis of two dimensions: source expertise and source objectivity. Editors and journalists generally think that official papers are experts on the position of the government while nonofficial papers voice public opinion. According to them, official media often contain propaganda, is too subjective and one-sided, often omit important facts and try to guide the reader in a certain direction. In their view, commercial media is better at providing the whole story, including negative aspects of an issue (Stockmann 2010; 2011:179).

What about foreign sources? In her Beijing study Stockmann found that, at least when reading news, most people rely on domestic news websites, and stay inside the Great Firewall. Chinese citizens prefer and trust media outlets they can identify with. When reporting on China, foreign media largely write for their own domestic audiences and not to the Chinese audience. Therefore, even English speaking and Western-oriented Chinese citizens primarily prefer domestic media sources (Stockmann 2010). However, when
Stockmann studied media consumption habits among Beijing citizens in 2005, the use of internet media was not as widespread as it is now. Moreover, her study included older respondents, not as skilled in and familiar at using such technology as a younger crowd. In the last twelve years, both internet technology, access and people’s familiarity with its use has expanded greatly. Thus, consumption today might not necessarily follow this same pattern.

1.4 Structure of thesis

This first section of the thesis has included an introduction to the thesis topic, a presentation of research questions, definitions of relevant terms, as well as an introduction to media in China. In the next section, the theoretical framework of the study will be presented and discussed. First, existing literature on critical media literacy will be examined, before discussing its implications in an authoritarian context. The second part of this chapter discussed the previous research here, exploring in more detail the studies of Toephl and Nathan.

In the third chapter, a discussion of the thesis’ methodological considerations will be put forward. How was the data for the analysis acquired? What methods were used? What can be said about the research design and method’s implications for the outcome of the analysis?

The fourth chapter discusses the empirical findings, and seeks to connect these findings to the theoretical framework. The chapter begins with an overview of how critical media literacy has been operationalized in the study, before examining the specific findings from the interviews, including the characteristics of the groups accepters, negotiators and decipherers, and the possible influences on respondents’ evaluations.

The last chapter, the conclusion, returns to the research questions and presents a condensed outline of the main arguments in the thesis.
2 Theoretical perspectives and existing literature

In this chapter the theoretical framework employed in the analysis will be presented. It contains a discussion about what critical media literacy implies – both with regard to the media environment as well as its relevance in authoritarian regimes. Related studies in Russia and China will be examined.

2.1 Critical media literacy

The concept *critical media literacy* is central in this thesis. The term critical has already been discussed in the previous section, but how does it fit into a media context? In daily life, most people need to critically assess and scroll tremendous amounts of information, especially from media sources. Information is all around, everywhere, and each person has to select the information that is considered useful and relevant to him or her. However, since there is so much of it available, it risks providing little more than a mass of indistinct data for those who do not have the skills to benefit from it. Thus, critical media literacy can be defined as the ability to gather, read, interpret, evaluate and communicate media messages, and to gain the intellectual tools and knowledge needed to understand and participate in the discourse production of one’s culture and society (Livingstone 2008; Keller and Share 2005:370-372).

In this way, media literacy is not only about being able to read and encode the values in the media, it is also about actively engaging in media practice and production. Cultivating one’s media literacy means going from being passive receivers to becoming active participants and informed citizens, integrating theory with practice (Cheung 2016: 177).

What are the specific elements of media literacy? Based on previous studies and theorizations by Lee and Wang (2016: 26), Glaser (1941) and Paul and Elder (2008), media literacy competencies can be categorized into three different categories, depending on their functions:
1 To access media and be aware of its impact (to have an attitude to thoughtfully consider the problems and subjects one encounters).

2 To understand media and develop analytical skills (to have knowledge of both the workings of media as well as the methods of logical inquiry and reasoning).

3 To apply what one learns in the media in practice, and to communicate well (to have a habit of and skill in applying the methods above).

In their study on media literacy education in China, Lee and Wang (2016) listed and took use of a wide range of literacy competencies. In this thesis, this list has been adapted to fit the specific purpose of the study. Relevant competencies (as listed in table 1) have been applied in the analysis of the respondents’ answers as a guideline when evaluating their levels of critical media literacy, which will be discussed in detail in the analysis chapter.

Table 1: Critical media literacy competencies and their functions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Critical media literacy competencies</th>
<th>Function</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Search effectively and efficiently for useful media messages</td>
<td>(1) Access (attitude)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Know how to select, organize and synthesize media messages</td>
<td>(1) Access (attitude)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critically analyze and evaluate the content and framing of media messages</td>
<td>(2) Understand (knowledge)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognize the effect of media on individuals and society</td>
<td>(2) Understand (knowledge)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understand how different media might present an issue in different ways, and how people might interpret messages differently</td>
<td>(2) Understand (knowledge)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understand the nature, functions, and operation of media institutions</td>
<td>(2) Understand (knowledge)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitor the media and recognize practices in need of improvement</td>
<td>(3) Apply (habit &amp; skill)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use various tools to engage in or communicate media messages</td>
<td>(3) Apply (habit &amp; skill)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

More specifically, what kind of media knowledge is implicitly referred to above? Kellner and Share (2005) has classified five core concepts of media literacy, pertaining to stocks of knowledge about the working conditions of media, knowledge of the influence of media ownership, as well as the familiarity with concepts such as framing, bias and objectivity. The first concept, related to non-transparency, point to the awareness that all media messages are created and shaped through a construction process. Media messages are never fully non-17

17 In this context, access is referring to the attitude and internal willingness to search for and read media messages, not the technical access.
problematic and transparent, as the media can never present the whole specter of reality - only represent it. The media has a privileged position in influencing people’s perception of events, people and issues in which they might have never observed in person. This is done through determining who is represented, what is represented, and how it is represented, selecting and drawing attention to some parts of reality, while simultaneously excluding others. The sum of these choices make certain follow-up angles more likely than others, and cause particular representations to appear repeatedly (Kellner and Share 2005:374).

The second element is concerned with the creative language, signs and symbols in media messages. Metaphors, verbal depictions, visual images, catchphrases and representations are all important means through which frames are established and meaning is constructed. Such signs consist of two parts: The form itself, in which can be a written word, photo or sound, and the corresponding concept. However, sometimes the denotation (the actual content) and connotation (the subjective perception based on ideological and cultural codes) become one and the same, and representation appears given, natural and self-evident, making the construction invisible. A higher level of media literacy helps to distinguish between connotation and denotation. In other words, separating what one sees or hears from what one thinks or feels (Kellner and Share 2005: 374; Hall 1980; Fiske 1990).

The third core concept relates to audience decoding, and is based on the encoding and decoding model of Stuart Hall (1980), which argues that a distinction must be made between the encoding (production) of media texts by the producers and the decoding (reception) of a message by the audience. Individuals might decode a message in the preferred way in tune with what is intended by the transmitter, or a person might produce his or her own interpretation. Regardless, meaning emerges in the process of subjectively analyzing a text relative to its context, implying that any reading and subsequent interpretation is highly dependent on the social context of the decoder. The meaning of a message is not given, and nationality, age, gender, race, class, or sexuality are all examples of factors that might incite diverse interpretations. Critical thinking skills are essential for people to be aware of the dominant discourses in society, and to understand the politics of representation, regardless of their own viewpoints and position (Kellner and Share 2005:375-376).

The forth core concept of media literacy pertains to the fact that all media have embedded values and views. Messages might have certain ideology, bias and connotations either
explicitly or implicitly represented in it. Media discourse produces meaning, not only through communicating events and phenomena, but also through its chosen representations of identities, places and possibilities for change. The portrayals of certain actors and the Self, either positively or negatively, has implications for how it is perceived by an audience. Having a high degree of media literacy helps to locate and distinguish these, and to recognize the subjectivity of all media communication.

Finally, the fifth and last concept of media literacy as posited by Keller and Share is related to motivation and the reason why messages are constructed and transmitted the way they are. Media serves as a channel of information between different parts of society, setting the political and social agenda, and thus being socially, culturally, politically and economically embedded. Messages must be seen in the light of the economic and political structure that supports, regulates or controls it, as the media is never independent from the system it operates within. This relates not only to the power of media, as discussed in paragraphs above, but also to power over media. Power over media - to decide what is reported, might be achieved through state regulation, censorship and patterns of ownership. Just as important, private ownership is not a guarantee for a critical attitude (Sæther 2008a: 24). Being aware that the concentration of ownership, monopolization, or state-controlled media influence the independence and diversity of information, is an essential element of critical media literacy (Kellner and Share 2005: 377).

A central point when it comes to a person’s critical media literacy is that it is socially constructed in the educational and cultural context of each society. Constructing meaning is a matter of calculated or learned associations, representations and preferences. Literacy evolve and shift in response to social and cultural change and the interests of elites who control the hegemonic institutions. Individuals might not be aware that they are being “educated and constructed” in a particular way, and might lack the critical approaches in which they are made aware of how media construct meanings, influence audiences and impose certain values. Critical media literacy involves cultivating these skills, so that one is able to investigate and evaluate the multiple meanings, values, stereotypes and ideologies that

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18 The two aspects of media-related power are interrelated. Ownership interests, advertisers’ requirements as well as state regulation and control all influence how and what media communicate to the audiences (Curran 2005; Sæther 2008a:18).
circulate in the information environment (Keller and Share 2005:372). One of the main claims from research on media literacy is also that in the internet age, citizens need a wider range of skills and knowledge than before in order to effectively cope with the more complex media environments (Livingstone 2008).

2.2 Critical media literacy in the authoritarian context

Through similar methods as in this study, Toepfl studied aspects of how young Russian citizens navigate and make sense of political news in the political hybrid state. His research was published in two separate articles. In his 2014 article, he explores the specific “maps” that citizens adopt in order to navigate political news. He studied what stocks of knowledge about the media sphere that could be considered dimensions of critical news literacy among his young interviewees in Russia, and in what areas they need knowledge in order to critically navigate and evaluate political news. He found that knowledge about the media sphere, how it works and what kind of actors that operate within affected how participants approached and made sense of ideologically diverse news items. He categorized his findings into four facets of critical news literacy, including knowledge about the segmentation of the news environment, news production processes, the constructedness of political messages, and last, the role of media in Russian society. The study illustrated how different stocks of knowledge crucially affected the ways citizens navigated and made sense of political news (Toepfl 2014).

In his other article (2013) Toepfl takes use of Stuart Hall’s (1980) encoding & decoding model as a theoretical framework in describing of how young Russian evaluated two news items on a topic in contemporary Russian politics; a news broadcast from state-controlled TV, and an entry to an oppositional blog. In line with Hall’s model, Toepfl categorizes his interviewees answers into three possible positions of decoding: (a) affirmative, (b) negotiated, and (c) oppositional. According to this model, individuals who decode a message affirmatively will operate within the reference code in which it was encoded. They do not question the message, but instead absorb the connoted meaning. The second type of readers are those who take on a negotiated type of decoding, which shows a mixture of adaptive and oppositional viewpoints. While they acknowledge the basic structure of the interpretive framework in which the message was encoded, at a more contextual level they make up their own opinions. In the third category, the oppositional, readers make sense of the message from
an oppositional position. They embed the new pieces of information in a different ideological framework. Toepfl’s findings shows that the respondents are more or less equally divided across the three categories. He finds this evidence that the political news atmosphere and the ways in which respondents evaluate, or decode, the different news in Russia, is indeed quite fragmented (Toepfl 2013).

Andrew Nathan (1985) used a similar categorization in his study on Chinese media’s role in forming the public’s attitudes and ideas. Through interviews with Chinese émigrés from 1979 to 1982, Nathan studied the respondents’ media reading habits, and how effectively the media reached and influenced their knowledge of and attitudes toward politics. Nathan divided the respondents into three groups based on their knowledge and receptiveness towards information: the accepters, skeptics and deciphers.

The accepters in Nathan’s study received news in an indifferent manner, without holding any strong conviction on whether what they read was correct or not. They did not believe in and trust everything, but doubt did not make them question it. Most of those who classified as accepters were young, from unexceptional class backgrounds, female (60%), and belonged to rural units and/or work units with poor media facilities. Politics did not interest them19, and they had no special reason to make additional efforts to learn more, as they were less vulnerable politically. At the time, it was difficult to get hold of sources other than official ones (it was illegal to import foreign Chinese language publications, and one could get punished by for example listening to foreign radio broadcasts), and this information monopoly discouraged people from asking questions. Most people also lacked background in politics to detect problems with the stories. That did not mean that they had not heard about the topics reported on in the media. One of Nathan’s respondents had heard about 10 out of 13 of the news items he asked about during the interview, but had no opinion on any of them. She never wondered why the media wrote what it did. Another respondent had noticed that the newspaper she read only reported good news, and never bad. Yet she did not bother to investigate why that was so (Nathan 1985: ch.9; Sæther 2008a:120-122).

On the contrary, the skeptics in Nathan’s study distrusted the news. Most of the respondents in this group were male (75%), and came from information-poor units with access mainly to

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19 75% of them reported to have none, low or slight political interest (Nathan 1985: appendix).
They cared more about identifying the truth, but preferred to not get too involved in reading between the lines. They acknowledged the media as a tool for the government’s political strategy, but after rejecting much of what they read, the skeptics did often not know what to believe (Nathan 1985: ch.9).

The third group, the decipherers, doubted the truth-value of propaganda, and thus actively searched for alternative explanations. They had better access to media resources, and paid closed attention to the media. An overwhelming majority (91%) were male, and were also slightly older. The decipherers tried to interpret the media texts they read in multiple ways, and to gather information from as many sources as possible, also from foreign media. However, they did not necessarily oppose state-controlled media, as they believed “the whole truth” would be misleading for the masses. Some accepted the government’s need to control information, while continuing to read between the lines themselves. Nonetheless, that did not mean that they approved of the way the media was performing, and they criticized the media for not being skillful enough in providing information (Nathan 1985: ch.9).

In Nathan’s study, the respondents all had reading habits not typical of the population at the time. Almost all respondents reported to make significant use of the media, reading news several times a week or every day. Regardless, despite their reported high level of media use, the majority of the respondents in Nathan’s study also said to have little or no interest in politics. Rates of political participation were low, and none had been a CCP member. One aspect on this is that Nathan’s respondents lived in China during the 1970’s, a time when not staying informed was associated with danger; you could say something wrong. Therefore, staying informed was not a way of involving yourself in politics, but a way of keeping out of it.

In his study, Nathan found that different levels of recognition of news topics depended mainly on the government’s decisions on how to publicize each piece of news. The

20 82% reported to have a high interest in politics, only 18% had none, low or slight interest.
21 In 1982, 23.5% of the Chinese population were illiterate. Nathan’s respondents were all literate. Moreover, the respondents were all émigrés in the United States and Hong Kong, and had diverse backgrounds, including farmers and industrial workers. Around 40% were rural citizen. Half of the respondents had some tertiary education. The majority of respondents were male (Nathan 1985: appendix).
government could feature, emphasize or repeat information, and it would influence the way an item was received by the audience. Nathan’s results confirmed that people had more knowledge of and were more affirmative of the news that was more extensively reported on in the media. Nathan’s findings showed that all respondents had been deeply influenced by propaganda, in one way or another. Most of the information they absorbed came from official press, and the respondents still did most of their political thinking within the framework of the party. Even though they negotiated and questioned much of what they read, they still accepted many of the goals and values set forth by the government. The media fulfilled this through repetition, and by excluding contrary ideas and information.

However, Nathan noted that completely missing among the respondents were those who could be called “believers”. None of the respondents had absolute trust in the media. However, Nathan also found that those that had lived in China after 1978, when the media became more open and diverse, trusted more of what the media said to be plausible interpretations and accurate accounts of the facts, while still being aware that the media was a centrally coordinated instrument of persuasion. Nathan thus came to the conclusion that “if the media continue to present a relatively complex and accurate view of the world, the proportions of believers in the population can be expected to grow” (Nathan 1985: ch.9).

Nowadays, however, everyone with a smartphone or a computer can access all sorts of media reports online. However, there are new differences in access, and one can differentiate between those who have the knowledge, habits and skills to effectively search the internet, know where to look and maybe even breach the Chinese Firewall, and at the same time also have the interest to do so, versus those who do not have these same dispositions, for various reasons.

How is this today? How do young Chinese process information and form opinions? The theoretical framework and processes described in the abovementioned section are at the center of the analysis in this study, as a way of operationalizing respondents’ ways of processing information. The specific application of the theoretical framework, as well as findings, will be discussed in further detail in the analysis chapter. Before that, the methodology chapter will describe the research process and collection of data.
3 Research design and method

What kind of data has the analysis been based on? How has the data been gathered? In this chapter the research design, method, case and materials will be presented, followed by a discussion on the implications the design and method may have on the analysis’ validity and reliability. Writing a thesis is a messy process, and definitely one of learning as-you-go, sometimes taking one step forward and two steps back. The knowledge production in this thesis has been an intricate process in which the understanding of the topic has developed through dialogue with the respondents. Through the ongoing analysis of information collected through interviews with respondents, the questions, concepts, design and theories have all been continuously rearranged and updated. It is hard not to agree with Sæther and Alasuutari that sometimes “it is difficult to relate to textbook descriptions of the research process; somehow they seem to be far removed from my own experiences” (Sæther 2008a:93; Alasuutari 1995:158)

3.1 Semi-structured interviews

The data was collected through semi-structured interviews with twenty-two Chinese university students in Hangzhou, China during March 2017, while staying as an exchange student at Zhejiang University. What do semi-structured interviews imply, and why has this method been chosen? In previous research done on media use in China, mostly quantitative methods have been used to collect data, and generally include a bigger sample. As discussed, not much qualitative research has been conducted on the media audience itself, and few studies go in-depth in exploring media habits and audience evaluation. Interviews, and in particular semi-structured ones, are suitable when one wants to explore what individuals think, or how they interpret a message, issue or event (O'Brien 2006: 28). Because of this purpose, interviews were chosen as the method to gather primary data.

What characterizes semi-structured interviews? Semi-structured interviews remain relatively open, allowing new ideas to be brought up during the interview as a result of what the respondents themselves contribute. The interviewer has a framework of fairly specific topics, themes and questions to be explored, but the respondents also have a great deal of flexibility in how to reply. The questions may not be asked in the exact same order as in the interview
guide, but nevertheless, during the course of the interview a set of similar questions will be asked, and in a similar wording. The respondents are given the opportunity to organize their answers in their own frameworks, which is essential when subjective issues are analyzed (Bryman 2012:472).

How were the interviews structured? Before beginning the interview, the respondents were asked to read and sign an information and consent form. On the second page of the consent form the respondents provided some basic personal information, including their age, study program and university, as well as whether they were undergraduate or graduate students. In the first part of the interview the respondents were asked about their online media habits, including questions about how often (if) they read news online, what kind of news they enjoy to read, and where they find them. The objective here was to assess their media habits and interest, and to examine whether the respondents could argue for which sources they visit, for what reasons, and how they engaged with the information they encountered.

The next section was concerned with the respondents’ perception and awareness of the Chinese media environment, and started with a fairly open question: “What is the media environment in China like?” Respondents were urged to convey their own personal opinions and views, and were encouraged to develop and elaborate on their arguments and thoughts. These questions were asked so as to bring forward the respondents own ideas about how the media function and relate to other entities of influence in China. The questions were broad, with no right and wrong answers. The objective was to examine what knowledge the respondents possessed regarding the media environment in China. Even though the questions asked could be considered difficult for some respondents, and some expressed that they did not have a very conscious relation or idea about what the media environment was like, that was also part of the findings in this study. When assessing critical media literacy, knowledge about the media sphere is an important factor.

The respondents were also asked to personally define what media “objectivity” (客观性) and/or “impartiality” (公平) implies. This was very important for the next section of the

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22 The respondents were guaranteed anonymity, and their names have therefore been replaced with random names in the study. All the interviews were recorded and then transcribed before analyzing the content. Consent form and transcriptions can be found in the appendix.
interview, as each person’s ideas about these concepts may differ greatly, not the least from the ideas of the researcher. Still, all respondents were asked to evaluate the same two articles, so in order to get on the same page, and to be able to comparatively analyze the respondents’ answers, an understanding of each respondent’s definitions was necessary. A critique of much Western research on China is that only “Western” tools and concepts are used in analysis, and thus cannot truly convey or comprehend the Chinese reality. When outsiders study China, the research actually tells us less about China, and more about our own worldview. Western academia cannot objectively or conclusively “know” China, because in the end we are colored and biased by our own environment, worldviews and values. We will always be watching China with Western characteristics.  

While we should strive to keep the language and questions as value-free as possible, complete impartiality or objectivity does not exist. As researchers we also bring with us our own values and ideas, always somewhat evident in our personal choices of research topics, problems and questions. In the course of this research, a constant challenge has been, to the highest degree possible, be able to explore the respondents’ thoughts and ideas without imposing predefined concepts (Livingstone et al., 2008: 119). Throughout the interviews, simple and everyday language was used. By asking the respondents to give their own definitions, and then evaluate the articles based on those definitions, part of the researcher’s bias was eliminated. Nevertheless, a difficulty and risk in this kind of research is that one can never truly know what is going on in the mind of the respondent. For all we know, the respondents might be saying only what they think you want to hear. There is always such a risk involved when doing research, but awareness is key, and even though this study (or any study) can never tell the full story, it may provide a more limited insight into how young Chinese navigate and evaluate media content.  

In the third section of the interview, the respondents were presented with the two case articles, in printed versions. The respondents were asked to read or look at them “as they like”, and it was up to each respondent how thoroughly they wanted to read them, thus reflecting their personal reading habits. The respondents were given as long as they wished to read the articles before starting. This was stressed so as to allow the respondents to read the items in peace and quiet without feeling pressured. The respondents were then asked simple

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23 For a debate on Western research on China, see for instance Pan (2012).
and open questions about their reactions and opinions on both articles respectively. When an answer seemed incomplete, probes were used to get more information as neutrally as possible, for example by asking “why is that so?” and “please tell me more”. First, the respondents were asked about what they thought the articles were about, and what and who they represented. Further, the respondents were asked about their response to the articles, and how they felt after reading them. Did the articles make sense? Did they consider the articles to be of high quality? What could be said about the choice of wording in the articles? The respondents were asked whether they considered the articles to be objective/impartial or not, and asked to elaborate more on their reasons for thinking so. Respondents were also asked to identify the sources, and comment on how they viewed them. What could be the source’s motivation for publishing the article? Did they consider the sources to be trustworthy? Moreover, how could they know whether the information provided was correct or false?

3.2 Sampling

How were the respondents in this study recruited? The purpose of the analysis should be considered when determining the scope and size of the sample. What is the goal of the research, and who is the study supposed to say something about? The aim of this study has not been to present results that can be generalizable to the whole population, but instead studied in-depth how a group of young Chinese citizens make sense of and evaluate political news. Naturally, the limited sample in this study is not sufficiently big, nor random, to draw any conclusions representative of Chinese society as a whole. Rather, the findings are reflections of the views of the respondents solely, and no attempt has been made to create a national profile, something that regardless would be very difficult simply because of the sheer size and diversity of the Chinese population. The final sample included twenty-two currently enrolled Chinese undergraduate or graduate students at universities in the city of Hangzhou. A combination of convenience sampling and maximum variation sampling was used when recruiting respondents24, so as to seek relevant but diverse respondents. Some respondents were recruited through network, and some recruited through direct contact on university campuses. The respondents differed in gender and studies pursued. The final

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24 Convenience sampling occurs when the most readily available respondents are selected. When using a maximum variation sampling method, the researcher selects a small number of units that maximize the diversity relevant to the research question (Lindlof and Taylor 2011: 111–113).
The sample had twelve female and eight male, fourteen undergraduate and eight graduate students. The appropriate sample size is often said to be reached when new participants do not contribute with any fundamentally new insights on the topic (Rudestam and Newton 2001: 93). Nonetheless, there will always be “more to find” and “more to explore” out there, and personally I could do this research forever. However, in terms of the aim and scope of this thesis, the data gathered are seen as sufficient for answering the research questions.

Some further questions arise regarding the sample: Why young? Why students? Why urban? First of all, young citizens represent the future, both politically and in every other sense. The citizens of this age group, born in the 1990s, are different from earlier generations. They grew up in a modern, commercialized and outward-looking China, in a globalized world, with smartphones, computers and easy access to the internet. They are the most skilled and fully immersed in the new, internet-based information environment. Second, the educated group of society can be considered to have fairly developed reading and writing skills, and are perhaps believed to be the most critical. There was also a practical reason involved, as this group was easily accessible to the researcher. Moreover, there might be several regional differences, in particular between rural and urban citizens, thus the sample only included students living in Hangzhou (but originally from various places in China).

### 3.3 Reporting on the South China Sea

What is a case, and why involve a case in this study? John Gerring defines a case study as “an intensive study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of units” where a unit is defined as “a spatially bounded phenomenon observed at a single point in time or over some delimited period of time” (Gerring 2007: 19). In this study, the reporting of the South China Sea dispute has been used as an instrumental case, which means that the case is examined mainly to provide insight into another issue. The main focus is on something else, and the case is connected to a wider context (Silverman 2011:139; Yin 2014:17-23; Hurst 2010: 163; Levy 2008). Thus, the involvement of this case is not so as to produce knowledge about the South China Sea dispute itself, and intention of the research is not to test how much the respondents know, in facts and numbers, about it. Rather, by utilizing this case as a guide for data collection and analysis, the respondents’ level of critical media literacy and general media consumption habits, are examined. Thus, the case is limited to the *reporting of* the South China Sea dispute, specifically in two different media articles.
The case was chosen because of some of its attributes and characteristics as a case. First of all because it is a fairly complex issue including multiple actors (experts, politicians, institutions, states, peoples), and has both historical and contemporary implications. It is also a case most Chinese have heard about, but their level of interest may vary. The time span involved makes the case more complicated as the situation, actors and interests change over time. By choosing a complex issue, it is possible to compare evaluation based on whether the respondent finds the issue interesting or not. It has also been selected because it is a somewhat controversial issue in China, and most of the official news reporting on the issue has been quite one-sided, especially in the official media sphere. Yet, critical voices still exist, but on the fringes, and is rare in official media. On social media platforms, on the other hand, they can certainly be found. This case was chosen exactly it works well when examining how different ways of framing in sources influence how people make sense of them.

A case may be simple or complex, but it is one among others. Qualitative research should produce explanations which are generalizable in some way, or which have a wider resonance (Mason 2002: 6). Is this case representative? In this study, the South China Sea dispute is just one topic among many possible topics as cases, as the larger class of units in which this specific case fits into is other political media messages in the Chinese media sphere. In this way the study has a wider resonance, and the findings are generalizable to other cases and other topics. However, the case is surely not the only one that can provide all of the prerequisites mentioned above, but it is a case that is known. It is not necessarily the hottest issue, but it has been, and it might be again.

3.3.1 Case material
In the third section of the interview, the respondents were presented with two articles on aspects related to the South China Sea dispute that differed in opinions expressed. One source conveyed a message loyal to the state’s official opinion, while the other was from an

\[25\] For more on the South China Sea issue, see for instance Jenner and Thuy 2016 and Jayakumar, Koh and Beckmann 2014.

\[26\] Both articles were presented in its original form, and in Chinese, to the respondents. Full texts and transcripts in English are available in the appendix.
oppositional voice outside of official media. The narratives of the two articles differ in terms of how they are depicting the roles of “the self” (China) in relation to “the others” – most notably Japan and the US. When choosing articles, a few additional considerations were made. First, choosing articles that respondents have access to without the use of VPN, and that respondents possibly could have stumbled across themselves on social media or online media sites. That involves looking at sites known and popular to the audience, and that people access from their phones. Articles from official media are obviously no problem. However, oppositional sources are much rarer and harder to locate.

Preferably, the articles should be relatively short. Since they are to be presented and discussed in detail in the interview setting, too long articles would be time consuming and also put pressure on the respondents. The respondents should have room to analyze and evaluate the content, the wording, the message, and the sources without feeling that the interview was a test, with correct and wrong answers. The first article, from official media, is quite short and concise. The second one, on the other hand, is a bit longer than initially preferred. However, in other aspects it suited the needs and requirements for articles, and in the end it was the best choice. Moreover, while the South China Sea dispute has been an ongoing issue for many years, articles that were fairly new were chosen, in order for the articles to represent the current debate, and current opinions, and not to be outdated.

The first article is a news article published on the online news site Sina News. However, it is a direct repost from a news report by China’s party newspaper the Global Times (环球时报)27. The Global Times focus on international issues from a communist and Chinese perspective, and can be said to have a clear pro-government slant, attracting a strongly nationalistic readership, also being under the control of the People’s Daily news outlet group. While the Global Times is an official media outlet sponsored by the state, Sina News is not, but instead part of the mainstream commercial media, which generate the majority of their revenues from online advertising, mobile value added- and fee-based services. Moreover, Sina News is a popular media outlet among the young internet users, as it is also home to the popular microblogging site Weibo. Many young Chinese follow Sina News on Wechat or

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27 Sina News is not licensed to produce original content, and all news published on the site are reposts from other news outlets with this license.
In addition to the abovementioned reasons, this article has been chosen because it is a recent publication. Moreover, it is an easy-to-read and relatively short report that clearly showcases the official opinion. The news report, posted on both Global Times and Sina News on Jan. 16th 2017, is titled “Abe’s “containment of China” tactic is failing, Ministry of Foreign Affairs calls the mindset unhealthy” (安倍“围堵中国”行遭遇敷衍 中方称其心态不健康). In the news report, Japan, with prime minister Shinzo Abe in focus, is portrayed as self-interested and reckless. The journalist’s critique and ridicule of Abe’s way of conducting diplomacy related to the South China Sea dispute is clear, playfully using language to belittle the way Abe is conducting it: During Abe’s South East Asia tour, he has painstakingly brought up the issue of the sea dispute over again and again, but with no luck, as he has been rejected by all of his counterparts in the countries he visited. According to the news report Abe only has treacherous intent, and his way of (mis)handling things has gained Japan little. In the final paragraph, the journalist states that Shinzo Abe has taken a serious beat to the face, and then asks, what feeling could possibly be in his heart right now? He should listen to China, which says his attitude is unhealthy, and do a serious round of self-reflection. China as the Self, on the other hand, is portrayed as cautious, responsible and almost passive, continuously calling for dialogue and peaceful solutions. Through this portrayal, the shortcomings of all the other actors are underlined and become more prominent. The report stands in contrast to reports on Abe’s tour in foreign media, which had a much more positive tone.

The second article is a blog post, published by an independent blogger which goes under the pen name Ding Dong (丁咚) on the portal www.blogchina.com (博客中国). The post chosen for this study, named “Is China being deceived by the United States in South China...”

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This is how I interpret the article(s), and is not used as a matrix for the respondents’ evaluation of the articles.

The site does not provide a view count for the specific news article, but as of Jan. 22 it had 7850 comments.

See for instance Joe Kelly, “Regional security focus for Shinzo Abe visit” The Australian. Niniek Karmini and Stephen Wright, “Indonesia, Japan affirm deeper ties during Abe’s Asian tour” Associated Press. Walter Sim, “The Trump factor on Abe’s Asia-Pacific tour” The Straits Times. Links to be found in the bibliography.

The blog has a browsing count at 8 259 864 at current standing, and with 908 essays published since 2010. The blog, named “Ding Dong’s Column”, has a steady amount of followers. Each of his posts usually enjoy in between 5000 to 50 000 unique views.
Sea?” (在南海中国又上了美国人的当?), currently has 77 407 views\textsuperscript{32}. All of his posts cover political topics, most of which have an international relations perspective, with focus on China and East Asia. Moreover, most of his analyses usually represents a view different from official sources, taking use of a much more critical tone of voice. The post chosen in particular challenges the official narrative about the South China Sea dispute, and can be considered oppositional. The blogpost was published on June 13\textsuperscript{th} 2016, a day after the tribunal at the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague issued its ruling in favor of the Philippines’ case against China’s claims on July 12\textsuperscript{th}. In the specifically chosen blog post, the writer comments on and discusses The Hague ruling and the claims and positions taken by the involved parties. The author is more sympathetic towards the Others, here the United States, than he is in his description of the Self, China. The author criticizes the Chinese side for being close-minded and not adept to voices in society. By not acknowledging the international norms and law framework, China only hurts itself. It has been challenging to locate oppositional articles accessible inside China related to the case, and that is, in the end, one of the main reasons for choosing this one. Oppositional articles do exist, but are not necessarily the ones that pop up first on the screen. A fairly recent article was needed, a not too lengthy one, one that was not too obscure or buried too deep on the internet, and it needed to be in opposition to the mainstream media coverage found. Thus, this article was an acceptable match.

3.4 Validity and reliability

In this section, the analysis’ validity and reliability will be discussed. To what degree does the study measure what it claims or intends to be measuring? (Lund 2002: 106; Bolsen 2005: 195). During the data collection phase, it is important to define the key variables, that is the specific concepts applied, and relate them to the aim and purpose of the study. Do the specific questions asked during the interview actually cover the theory? In order to do so, interview questions should be accurate and precise. However, in this study it was also important to remain open, in order to investigate what the respondents actually thought about the media environment and the specific case articles without asking leading questions. It was necessary to avoid confirmation bias and not study China merely based on “Western

\textsuperscript{32} This post is the blogger’s most viewed post in 2016, and is his overall top 3 most viewed post (the highest ranked has 2 120 000 views, and the second has 360 140 views). Readers can follow his account for updates and new posts on Wechat or on the blog providers’ network.
characteristics”. Nonetheless, presenting the respondents with an actual case allowed for a more specific examination of their media content meaning-making process that occurs within the context of an authoritarian state. The respondents’ answers could be examined up against the specific literacy competencies as discussed in the theoretical chapter, as well as cross-examined with the results from previous research by Toephl and Nathan. However, some self-critique is warranted when it comes to how the interviews were conducted and the data that thus came out of it. Because of the language barrier, I sometimes failed to catch the opportunity to probe in further detail about interesting information the respondents provided during the interview (which was not noticed before transcribing).

Are the results valid across subjects, times and settings? To what degree is it warranted to generalize the results to other contexts? External validity evaluates whether and to what extent the results of the analysis are generalizable (Lund 2002: 105-106; Lund 2005: 122). Selection bias is one thing that might reduce the validity of the study. If the sample is not enough random, and respondents are too much alike the researcher, the representativeness of the sample might be weakened (Tansey 2007: 769; Silverman 2011). However, most of the respondents in this study were not selected through personal networks, and even if they were, the way of establishing contact involved a great degree of randomness. For instance, most of the respondents that were recruited from network might have met with me only once before, for example at the gym, in a cafe, on the bus, on a mountain hike or at a party. In addition, by ensuring variety in gender, years of education and studies pursued, the sample of respondents were made as representative as possible. Moreover, as have been discussed in the above sections, it has not been a goal to be able to generalize to a wider population, but merely to present findings from a limited group. The respondents were all young, educated and urban, a group that differs from the Chinese population as a whole, along dimensions that undoubtedly affects their experiences of and attitudes towards media content. To get a truly representative group of informants one must interview a scientific sample of the entire population. That is neither the purpose nor possible in this master thesis.

Will the results be the same if the study was to be conducted again? What measures have been taken to minimize systematic error or bias? Reliability refers to the quality of data, and measures whether results are consistent even if repeatedly tried or by other researchers (Berry 2002: 679; King, Keohane and Verba 1994: 25). The use of open-ended questions and probing in semi-structured interviews is a less systematic approach, and makes comparison of
the data more challenging (Leech 2002: 665; Berry 2002: 681). However, measures were taken to make the process of the interviews as consistent as possible. The interview guide and the three sections in it guided the interviews in the same direction, and ensured that all topics and questions were brought up, while still allowing the conversation to flow freely (Willis 2006: 145; Kvale and Brinkmann 2009).

Regardless, the chosen case articles might be of significant for the result. It is not possible to say whether one had gotten the same results with different articles. Thus, there is a certain uncertainty regarding the reliability of this study, as it is with most research. However, the fact that the findings in this study is in line with similar findings across time (Nathan 1985) and space (Toephl 2014), can be argued to be an indicator of the reliability of this study. When it comes to reliability, transparency and systematic thinking and application methods are key (Lund 2002: 80). It is important to be open and honest about the research process, and to provide sources and explanations whenever needed and possible. My case material and data are thus available in the appendix for those with further interest.
4 Analysis and findings

This chapter presents the research findings. How often did respondents report to read news articles online, and what types of topics were they interested in? Were they aware of multiple interpretations of the messages? Did they read beyond the headline, in order to understand the whole story? How did they assess the sources? First, a more general description of how models of critical media literacy has been applied to the research will be put forward. This will be followed by an overall presentation of the findings in line with a categorization of three different respondent groups. Further, a more in-depth analysis of the different influences on evaluation will be examined and discussed.

4.1 Levels of critical media literacy

Through the interviews and through their evaluation of the two case articles, respondents were examined in both theory and in practice. Based on their answers during the interview, respondents were categorized into three levels of critical media literacy, similar to the categorizations by Toepfl (2014), Nathan (1985) and Hall (1980)33, but with some alterations. This is linked to the definition of critical as not necessarily rejecting the messages. Especially the name for the third category utilized by both Hall and Toepfl; oppositional, is not completely suitable in this thesis, as one could belong to this category without being in opposition to the message. In this study the respondents were presented with two media texts which differed greatly: one text is written from a so-called dominant-hegemonic perspective, while the other is from an oppositional perspective. However, it is not the respondents’ positions and personal opinions on the messages in the texts that is being studied, but rather how they came to that conclusion. Thus, the term “to decipher” better explains the third category, as it is about identifying the different values and perspectives in a text regardless of where they stand themselves. Thus, the respondents in this study were categorized as either (a) accepters, (b) negotiators, or (c) decipherers34.

33 Toepfl categorized the respondents as either affirmative, negotiated or oppositional, while Nathan used the terms accepters, skeptics, and decipherers. Hall wrote about the dominant-hegemonic position, the negotiated position, and the oppositional position.
34 Reality is complex, and all respondents were different from each other. Ideally one could create a specter, and each of the respondents could be placed on a slightly different place on that specter. The categories are generalizations, and the opinion of one respondent is not necessarily the opinion of the others. Nonetheless, the
What does it take to belong to the different categories? The media literacy competencies as listed in table 1 (ref. page 15), as well as the specific stocks of media knowledge as described by Kellner and Share in the theoretical chapter, has served as a guideline when evaluating the respondents’ level of media literacy. The respondents in this thesis were evaluated on their ability to (1) access media and be aware of its impact, in other words whether they had an attitude to thoughtfully consider the problems and subjects one encounters, (2) on their ability to understand media and develop analytical skills, in other words whether they had knowledge of both the workings of media as well as the methods of logical inquiry and reasoning, and finally (3) on their ability to apply what they learned in the media in practice, and communicate well, in other words, whether they had the habit of and skill in applying the methods mentioned above. Based on their answers during the interviews, the respondents’ competencies were evaluated on the scale poor – average – high. Those who scored “poor” on the most competencies were characterized as accepters, those who scored “average” on the most competencies were characterized as negotiators, while those who scored “high” on the most competencies were characterized as decipherers. What this implied in practice will be explored further detail in the upcoming sections of this chapter.

Both Toepfl (2014) and Nathan (1985) found a more or less equal distribution of respondents in the three categories. Regardless, before collecting the data, no particular expectations or hypothesis were put forward. The conditions were somewhat different from the studies by Toepfl and Nathan, and before having concrete data on the table it was important to stay as open and expectancy-free as possible. While conducting the interviews no attempt was made to place the respondents into categories, but when analyzing the data, the respondents were still more or less equally distributed across the three categories. Even though there were slightly more respondents in the accepter group (9) than in the negotiator (7) and decipherer (6) groups, that is not necessarily significant, because of the limited sample and scope of the study. However, there are reasons to believe that having a high level of critical media literacy goal of research is exactly to simplify reality, and thus it is useful to use such categorizations. Not because they perfectly illustrate the world, but because they help make sense of it.

35 Nathan’s sample from China more than 30 years included 39% accepters, 39% skeptics and 22% decipherers (Nathan 1985). In the study on Russian students, Toepfl found that respondents were more or less equally distributed across the categories affirmative (8;7), negotiated (4;7) and oppositional (4;6) (Toepfl 2014:257)

36 A list with information about all respondents can be found in the appendix.
– as the decipherers in this study, might not be as widespread in the general population as in this study, since respondents were all urban and highly educated. Nonetheless, this research does at least provide a basis for saying that the respondents’ opinions exist among the general population. There is no lack of critically thinking minds among young Chinese citizens today, but likewise, there is no lack of people not particularly ready to question what they read, either.

4.1.1 Accepters

In the first category we find the accepters. Nine respondents belonged to this category, or 41% of the sample. The respondents in this group were slightly younger, and had a slight majority of female respondents. This group had a limited level of critical media literacy. They rarely read news, if they did read they preferred entertainment or sports related “lighter” news, as they were not particularly interested in or attentive towards political or social issues. They were inexperienced news readers, and seemed less knowledgeable about where and how to access other types of articles than the ones automatically offered to them. The media messages they came across in their daily lives would for the most part be in line with official policy, as they were not familiar with the use of different resources and tools or VPN services. They were socialized into this system, and were thus more likely to go along with the main public discourse, not really questioning the political information they encountered in the media.

This shone through in their evaluation of the case articles, and they did not have particular strong opinions on any of them. They mostly decoded and evaluated the texts in line with the Chinese official policy line encoding, and were not aware of other possible interpretations. That induced them to prefer the first case article. In general, they did not point out problems in the way it was framed, the choices of wording, or how the actors were portrayed. For instance, respondent Ma Yuan37 said that “this article is saying that Abe’s actions are not very good, but it is not favoring anyone, it is just pointing out that some of Abe’s actions are not very good”. He continued to evaluate the article as “good, the wording is alright, it is well-written and precise” (Interview, Ma Yuan). Some pointed out a slightly aggressive tone in the language, but did not read more into it than that. When asked about motives, several

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37 All respondents in this study remain anonymous, and their real names have thus been replaced by random fictional names.
pointed out that “there are no particular motives”, or “it is just reporting on the facts”, “they just want to let the people know about what is going on” (Interviews, Hui Zeng; Ma Yuan).

How respondents related to the concept of objectivity was of significance here. In China, objectivity has long been a politicized term regarded as synonymous with reporting everything, and even general secretary Liu Shaoqi stated that “to report everything is objectivism”, though this has not necessarily been put out in practice (Nathan 1985:155). The accepters’ answers were all more or less in line with this: they could define the concept of objectivity in simple terms, but was inconsistent in applying it to their own evaluation of the articles. Most of them answered that objectivity was related to “the truth, the real” (真实), or in their words, to “report on the real situation” (Interview: Yue Hong), “what one can support with evidence” (Interview: Li Li), or “the real facts, in a timely manner, to include everything” (Interview: Hui Zeng). However, they could not elaborate more on the concept or what it meant in practice. They simply did not have this experience.

While most respondents pointed out that the first article was written from a Chinese official perspective, they did not acknowledge this as a bias, as they thought this was in fact the most objective representation of the issue. Thus, in line with their own interpretations of the term objective, they found the first article to be just that; fairly objective and truthful. For instance, Ma Yuan said that “the first article is more objective, since it is about politics from a government perspective, so it is inclined to support China’s self-interests” (Interview: Ma Yuan).

However, it was not that they necessarily accepted everything they read, but instead they had a more passive and indifferent attitude. They were not interested politics or the case topic, and did not bother spending time reading up on it. They had other things in their lives that interested them more than news reading. For instance, Hui Zeng said that for him, such topics were trivial and nonessential, and he did not have any particular opinion on any of them. This could be further exemplified by an answer by Fo Han, stating that: “about these viewpoints, I won’t agree but I won’t oppose either. I just accept that some people have opinions like this. That’s it. It is all fine” (Interview: Fo Han).
The accepters felt more uncomfortable reading the second article, for several reasons. It was very different from the articles they would usually read, both in terms of topic, writing style and opinions expressed. Since they were inexperienced at reading different types of media texts, they had rarely read such an article before and did not really know where to start when assessing it. They often answered that they did not know or understand the topic, and this seemed like a big hurdle for them to evaluate the article(s). For instance, when asked about her reaction to the second article, Li Xuan said that “I don’t have any particular feelings after reading it, political issues are not easy to understand”, while Fo Han said that “it has a very difficult language, and it is about politics, which I am not interested in. It just makes me confused” (Interview: Li Xuan; Fo Han). Others emphasized that their lack of interest was gender related. For instance, Chun Hua said that:

“For me this is all just words, when I read it I feel a bit awkward. I don’t have any particular reactions to it. Girls are not interested in such political or historical issues” (Interview: Chun Hua).

Since it was difficult to read, they put more emphasis on the headline, and since it expressed some negativity towards China, many of the respondents felt uncomfortable with it, inducing them to reject the article’s credibility. For instance, Xue Mei said that “it’s because of the headline. I don’t know what to say, but I just feel like it is not a very formal title, it is just for attracting people’s attention, it is not objective” (Interview: Xue Mei).

Further, when it came to their more general knowledge of different media types and awareness about the workings of media in China, the accepters were more likely to not know how to answer. Many simply said that they did not know about such things. For example, Hui Zeng said that Chinese media has “Chinese characteristics”, but could not elaborate more on what that implied in practice. Nonetheless, many respondents were aware and brought up during the interview how media are controlled by the government. This has never been a secret in China, and thus it is not a surprise that respondents mentioned this. For instance, Fo Han said that:

“Official media is the voice of the state; the voice they want us to hear. If they want you to know about it you will know about it, but if they do not want you to know about it you will not know about it” (Interview: Fo Han).
However, she did not really see this as a problem, it was necessary. While many had an idea about impartiality and professionalism in media, and advocated a freer media, at the same time they also pointed out that media should be under the government’s control. For instance, Yue Hong and Li Li said that:

“China is a one-party state, and thus the government should control the media. But the government should also give citizens freedom of speech” (Interview: Yue Hong)

“The media’s function is to provide the news to its citizens, and the government’s function is to filter out information that is inappropriate, in order to protect us” (Interview: Li Li).

Fan Lei also pointed out that he did not think highly of freedom of speech “and such things”, because the information easily becomes biased in the hands of ordinary people. He thought that everyone should be able to express what they want, but that the government has to control the information environment as well, because otherwise there would be too much false and incorrect information in circulation. In this way, he did not question what was the real or the truth. To him, there could just be one truth, it was unquestionable.

4.1.2 Negotiators

The second category consist of the negotiators. Seven respondents belonged here, or 32% of the sample. In general, the respondents that categorized as negotiators had an intermediate level of critical media literacy, meaning that they were skeptical of and questioned the media, and did not take anything for granted, but accepted the general framework. They were more experienced readers, and had a higher interest in reading news articles, reporting to read several days a week but not necessarily every day. Negotiators had a more conscious approach to what types of media articles they read. Most of them reported not to be particularly interested in political issues; they would keep updated and informed about the main headlines, but paid closer attention to other topics of personal interests or to their field of study, for instance related to science, technology, finance, economics or education etc.

Some of the negotiators used VPN serviced to access and read content outside of the Chinese Firewall. For instance, Zhang Sheng said that he was annoyed that some academic journals and resources he wanted to use in his studies are blocked in China, so he uses a VPN to access them. He strongly advocated a less strictly controlled information environment, but had more academic reasons for it. He was knowledgeable about the media, and used his VPN
to read news too, but it was not his main concern. Likewise, Hong Cheng preferred foreign media outlets, saying that she finds domestic media outlets to be tasteless and boring, and often too one-sided, while in foreign media there are more sides to every case.

The negotiators were fairly knowledgeable about the media environment in China and what it implied in practice. For instance, Hong Bo stated that “Within the framework of the current media environment, as long as you do not breach the norms it is fine, it is free, but you have to keep within this frame” (Interview: Hong Bo). Xiao Ling also talked about how the media has freedom to produce content and do what they want, as long as it is in line with the party policies and guidelines. She said that media does not have absolute freedom, but it still has character. It cannot report too extensively, but still, lots of different opinions can be found.

Both Luo Yi and Yan Qing emphasized that the change media in China had gone through over the last decades was remarkable and something to be proud of, and that the media now was more in touch with the people. They recognized both achievements and challenges, and generally had an optimistic about the direction for the future, thinking that improvements were made every day.

How they related to the concept of objectivity, and how they applied this to their evaluation of the articles, was a defining characteristic for the negotiators. Like the accepters, they were able to provide good and sound theoretical definitions of what objectivity was and implied, for instance that it was “to look at an issue from an outside perspective” (Interview: Yan Qing) or “to not be colored by personal opinions” (Interview: Xiao Ling). One respondent, Hong Bo, also said that “objectivity is to not discuss politics, to be completely free”.

However, they did not question the concept, like the decipherers did. Rather, they were the ones with the strongest opinions on what was objective and what was not, and they cared more about identifying the truth.

In general, they did not particularly like any of the two articles. In contrast to the accepters, they questioned the first article, and found it to be too one-sided and partial. Xiao Ling, for instance, recognized the framing right away, saying that “it is favoring China, always saying that China is right no matter what” (Interview: Xiao Ling). She reported to frequently see articles like this, but she was skeptical of them. Bo Teng also recognized the subjectivity in the first article, saying that “I feel like this is very partial, and there must be more information that they are avoiding or not providing” (Interview: Bo Teng). Similarly, Hong
Bo also got this feeling right away. He thought the language was very formal, so as to not make any mistakes. Yet, when asked about possible motives, many of the respondents pointed out that the article merely had an informative purpose, it was written and published in order to give a signal to the public about the government’s position. They emphasized the usefulness of such articles, while not really believing everything that was written in them.

Compared to the accepters, the negotiators could more efficiently evaluate the second article. According to Bo Teng, even though it was written from a personal point of view, its argumentation was comprehensive and induced the reader to really think about the issue. He found the second article to be more objective and more true to the facts. Likewise, Xiao Long and Bo Teng perceived better of the second article, since it discussed the topic from different angles:

“It is more objective since it not only discusses the good points, but the bad ones too. It points out the ills of the times, that is why it is better” (Interview: Xiao Ling).

“At least it points out existing problems, to let us know that China’s diplomacy in the South China Sea is not entirely as smooth (as they want us to believe). There is definitely something to it, but one cannot fully trust it” (Interview: Bo Teng).

However, many negotiators still felt uncomfortable with the second article criticizing China, and in order to maintain self-esteem expressed a negatively biased evaluation against it. For instance, Yan Qing and Hong Bo expressed that:

“It is not supporting China, so it is not objective. It feels like it is a bit too inclined to defend foreign views” (Interview: Yan Qing).

“He is trying to convey a neutral and objective attitude, by letting the readers know that he is analyzing the issue from a neutral point of view. But in reality the opinions he is expressing are not neutral at all (...) It is because his position and ideas favor the West” (Interview: Hong Bo).

Overall, the negotiators were knowledgeable and relatively attentive, but also sometimes showed some inconsistencies in the way they rationalized, first saying one thing and later saying something different. They showed that they were highly competent on some aspects, but also scored lower on some competencies. Compared to those with the highest level of critical media literacy, they were more insecure and, in the big picture, less comprehensive.
4.1.3 Decipherers

Those with high critical media literacy were the ones who had the attitude to access, knowledge to understand and the habit of and skill in applying what they had learned in practice. This third group consisted of the decipherers, which six respondents were classified as, or 27% of the sample. The group included an equal number of male and female respondents. They were highly skilled at accessing, reading, evaluating and communicating media articles, and did so on a daily basis. All of the six respondents not only informed that they read news every day, but could also thoroughly argue for which types of topics they were interested in, which sources they visited, how they accessed them, and how they interacted with the content they encountered there. For instance, Lin Hai had a very conscious approach to the news he accessed. On the contrary to most of the other respondents, he did not use mobile apps to read news. Instead, he searched specific sites. When asked about the reason for this, he said that:

“News articles are not only found through mobile apps, I can find news in so many other places, at any time I want. I don’t need those apps, because my own news reading abilities are high, I can look for them on my own” (Interview: Lin Hai).

Decipherers were also familiar with foreign media, and had ways of reading media content outside of the firewall through the use of VPN services. One respondent, Shi Lei, at first said that he only occasionally read news, a few times a week. He thought of it as a waste of time, as he would get to know about the main headlines through his friends anyway. When probing further into his media reading habits, it became clear that he does indeed read a lot more, but he did not include this in his initial answer because most of what he reads comes from international media sources as well as academic journals, in which he uses a VPN to access. He said that the reason why he does not read much domestic news is because he considers it to be boring and too unvarying. In foreign media each and every topic flourishes with different opinions and angles of view, which he finds far more interesting.

Decipherers expressed a deep interest in understanding various societal and political issues, and read beyond the headlines in order to comprehend the whole story. For instance, Lin Hai expressed his interest for various international, political and social news, mentioning several examples. He had been following the recent developments in the Sino-Korean conflict with close interest. He emphasized that he often read news, but also pointed out his own
inadequacies, saying that:

“Just because I read a lot, that does not mean that I understand everything. That is the thing with news, they are basically just pieces of information. But I enjoy reading about these things” (interview: Lin Hai).

The decipherers had extensive knowledge about the workings of media in China and abroad, showed awareness about the fact that media is never completely free from the system it operates within, neither in China or abroad. They understood that all media messages are in one way or another biased, and contained implicitly or explicitly expressed values and ideas. For instance, Liu Yao talked about how he thought the media environment in China is diffuse, that in some aspects it is really free and open, while when it comes to some things, mainly politics or sensitive issues, it is restrained. He said that in China, influence on media is more direct and part of the structure. However, he pointed out that even though influence might not be as obvious as in China, such influences definitely exist in foreign media too, regardless of ownership. Other respondents talked about how media in China had evolved over the last few decades into what it is today, pointing out both achievements as well as challenges. They appreciated how the media today was able to report in more detail about political issues. Lin Hai mentioned the recent coverage on the NPC and CPPCC\(^{38}\) as a positive example of political events that now were reported on more openly than before. On the other side, they also emphasized problems, referring both to restrictions, censorship, and unfortunate effects of marketization – including an increased trend to write tabloid and sensational stories in order to make money, or in Lin Hai’s words: “they all duplicate each other, echo what others have said” (interview: Lin Hai)

The decipherers cared less about “the truth” when reading and evaluating the articles, and problematized the concept of objectivity. For instance, Zhu Yi had a very nuanced view on objectivity and what it implied, saying that:

“In fact there is no such thing as objective media, because all and every media have self-interests and values. Even those who claim to be independent and impartial actors, their personal background and experiences will influence their reporting of an issue (…) there is no such thing as absolute objectivity” (interview: Zhu Yi).

\(^{38}\) National People’s Congress and Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference. In China generally referred to as 两会.
Lin Hai also questioned absolute objectivity. He talked about how all texts are written by people, and even though one can and should strive to be as neutral as possible, in the end it is all about different degrees - about how deep you are willing to dig. There is no such thing as absolute objectivity, and it is impossible for anyone to be completely objective or to judge whether something is objective or not, because you never know the whole backstory. Similarly, Liu Yao stated that:

“In theory, objectivity is that which is based on absolute facts, but in reality, there is no such thing, because who is to decide what is the correct way and what is not? That is impossible to solve” (Interview: Liu Yao).

He continued to say that the best we can do is to try to base our evaluation on as logic grounds as possible, and take all sides of an issue into account. Everyone has their own interests, and by identifying these differing interests and positions, by applying relevant laws and norms, and by considering and acknowledging the cultural and political systems at work, one can try to make a more comprehensive account of an issue. For him, that was objectivity in practice.

Decipherers showed a more structured and systematic evaluation, and were more willing to be observant regardless of current trends and where they positioned themselves. They had well-formulated answers and could talk extensively, thoughtfully considering the problems and subjects in the case articles. When talking about the first article, Liu Yao said that the author is “wearing glasses” and is reporting from only one position. He mentioned the choice of wording in the article, pointing to its negative portrayal of Shinzo Abe. He pointed to specific words and sentences in the text, pointing out how they expressed subjective viewpoints. Likewise, Shi Lei said that the article is reporting on actual facts and events, but from a biased viewpoint. For instance, saying that Abe’s mindset is unhealthy is a subjective opinion, but in the article it was framed like a fact. Shi Lei said that the first article is not putting Japan in a justifiable light, saying that “it is solely the Chinese side speaking, and even as an opponent Japan is not put in a justifiable light, it feels like they are trying to smear them” (Interview: Shi Lei). He continued to say that since everyone in China are so used to this kind of language, few people question it.
Liu Yao perceived better of the second article, since the author evaluated the issue from all sides, and at the same time was honest about his own position. Likewise, Rong Han said that even though the author expressed his own opinions, she could respect that, since he analyzed the issue in a practical and academic way. The decipherers were also aware of their own experiences could bias their judgments. For instance, Lin Hai said that he himself was unable to neutrally evaluate the South China Sea issue, since his identity as Chinese would color his views. He said that only those standing on the outside, those with no interests in the issue, could report on it in a more neutral manner. When asked about his reaction to the first case article, Liu Yao also said that he could compare the reactions of his former and current self:

“Before, when I read articles like this, I would become angry and ask “why is Japan doing that? But then I realized that this is what the government wants us to read, it is not necessarily completely true (...) Many people are like that, they think that everything China does or stands for is correct and true, but they don’t look thoroughly at the facts. Instead people should think about such issues long-term, and do what is most beneficial for the country on the long run” (Interview: Liu Yao).

Liu Yao continued to talk about how his habits and attitude had changed over time as a result of engaging and reading up on such topics online. Previously he used to get into discussions, but then he realized that people were not going to change their opinions anyway. Moreover, his experiences had not only made him more critical, it has also made him more selective, saying that “when I read such news now, I remind myself to look at them rationally, but eventually it just came to that I rarely read this kind of news”, referring to nationalistic news stories (Interview: Liu Yao). He now preferred to keep his opinions to himself, continuing to read between the lines on his own but without involving himself in debates.

### 4.2 What shapes evaluation?

Several factors influence how individuals navigate and make up their minds about information they encounter in the media. In this section, how these factors relate to each other, as well as to the theoretical framework, will be discussed. The section will address variables relating to the recipients (interest & experience), the sources (credibility & expertise), the messages (argument quality & style) as well as context (case, time setting, distractions).

#### 4.2.1 Recipient variables: Interest & experience
Recipient variables refer to the respondents’ interest in and experience at reading news in general, and their prior attitude, perceived personal relevance and interest in the case topic in particular. Findings in this study show that how often the respondents reported to read news online but correlated strongly with their levels of critical media literacy, and consequently how they assessed the articles, as well as what types of sources they preferred and trusted. Thus, the interest variable has been found to be the most significant variable in this study, and in turn has effect on the other variables.

Those who reported to rarely read news, and were not particularly interested in politics, had a lower level of media literacy than those who reported to frequently read news and had a high interest in it. For the inattentive ones, it might be argued that this is in fact a strategy of rational ignorance. Since these respondents are not interested in politics, they refrain from acquire information about it because the perceived cost of reading up on such topics exceeds the perceived potential benefit this information would provide (Downs 1957; Popkin 1991; Sniderman et al. 1991). Since they are not likely to have to utilize such knowledge in practice, they prefer spending their free time doing other things than reading political news. They have not cultivated their media literacy skills – because they have no immediate reason to do so.

While more of the accepters reported to mainly be interested in entertainment and sports related topics, a greater share of the negotiators and especially the decipherers reported to follow topics in geopolitics and foreign affairs with close interest. The decipherers were considerably more politically and socially attentive than the other respondents, and enjoyed talking in length and depth about the different topics discussed during the interview. Their frequent exposure to online news made them more skilled at both accessing and reading, and they were more able to apply their knowledge in practice. They were more involved on a personal basis, and had more to share. While focus of interest varied from respondent to respondent, it was likely to be a result of personal experiences. Zhu Wenyi (D), who studied geo-technology, was familiar with the geological aspects of the South China Sea issue through her studies. Even though she was more interested in the more scientific and technical

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39 This point will be further discussed in the next section about source variables.

40 In other research, a link between interest and participation has also been found. For instance, Dutta-Bergman found that individuals who were active on online forums were also more likely to be engaged in their real communities (Dutta-Bergman 2006).
aspects of the case, she had read a lot about it and this exposure helped her to make sense of and “map” new information regarding it, thus making her efficiently and concisely evaluate the articles.

Likewise, it was clear that one respondent’s experiences as a member of the Uighur minority had greatly influenced her ideas about media and her way of decoding media texts. She was especially familiar with the working conditions of journalists in Xinjiang, and was clearly opposed to what she viewed as a severely restrictive and oppressive media environment. She advocated a freer media several times during the interview, and it was clear that this was a topic of personal relevance and importance to her. These experiences had led her to be distrustful of official media, and she instantly recognized and pointed out possible motives and interests in the official media case article. Nonetheless, she was proud to be Chinese and felt a strong connection to China, so there was no dissonance between being able to criticize and urge improvement of the media and identify strongly as both Chinese and Uighur.

Moreover, the decipherers in this study did not necessarily position themselves as oppositional to the messages in official media. Rather, they simply recognized the possible interpretations and aspects of the texts. While they criticized or did not agree with, for example, the use of language or how the texts were built up, or even the whole media structure that produced the text, their personal opinions when it came to the topic, in this case the South China Sea dispute, was not necessarily oppositional. For instance, Zhu Yi was able to reflect open-mindedly within alternative systems of thought, and acknowledged that different representations existed in different media, but still actively chose to support China’s claims. Thus, respondents could be so-called “pro-China” in this particular case, while still have a critical attitude towards the media messages they read and the structure that produces them.

As findings showed, levels of critical media literacy did not influence the respondents’ sense of pride and self-feeling about being Chinese in any way. Indeed, all respondents except one (Ma Ling, which in fact was a party member) expressed great patriotic feelings, but their basis for feeling proud of China and what China represents was completely unrelated to their level of media literacy or how they evaluated the articles. What made them feel proud differed greatly from respondent to respondent, and was connected to their personal interests. For example, Luo Yi, who studied art, emphasized China’s long cultural history and
accomplishments within the arts, and likewise, Zhang Sheng, who studied information technology, talked about China’s contributions to this field. Other answers ranged from feeling secure at night, the expansive fast-speed train network, the country’s rapid economic development and improvement of living standard, that China had had joined the WTO and arranged the Olympics, and China’s cultural heritage, just to mention some. Some respondents stated that since they were born Chinese they had a responsibility to feel proud, but that did not mean that they accepted everything in China as good or correct, as many showed through their assessment of the media environment and in their evaluation of the specific articles. Thus, there is no found correlation between patriotic feelings and assessment of the articles in this study. Respondents could just as fine be both patriotic and at the same time critically assess the media messages they read.

4.2.2 Source variables: Credibility & expertise

Source variables relate to the perceived credibility, expertise and authority of the sources. How did the respondents’ opinions on the sources influence how they evaluated information? Research in public opinion has long shown that individuals take cues from the sources when evaluating information, especially when issues are complicated\textsuperscript{41}. If a person already has a strong favorable opinion about a source, messages from this source are seen as more trustworthy, while the opposite is also true. Moreover, statements from sources with perceived authority, like public figures and experts, are more seen as more credible, and thus generally more persuasive (Nicholson 2012). In line with this, the findings in this study show that especially inexperienced readers are affected by their relation to the sources, and the source they were familiar with, in this case official media, was seen as more trustworthy.

Many respondents, in particular the accepters, found the first article to be more credible than the second one. In the first article, there are several references and quotes to the Chinese Foreign Ministry and their spokespersons - public authority figures. Several respondents saw this as a sign of trustworthiness. Since the second article was a blog post written by an individual, its subjectivity also became more clear to many respondents. They did not trust this article, because of its source – because it was a blog post it did not have authority in their

eyes. For instance, Xiao Ling doubted the author of the blog entry, and said that since he was just an ordinary person, and not even a politician or a leader, it was less credible.

Thus, those with lower levels of critical media literacy had stronger preconceptions on different sources, and were more trusting of official media - because it was official media. For instance, Hui Zeng said that “Global Times is our official media, so I trust them” (Interview: Hui Zeng). They considered official media to be fairly accurate and objective in their reporting, and more likely to report on issues in a sober and moderate way without using sensational headlines and other effects to gain attention. They knew that these were the stories that the government wanted them to have, but they thought this was fair and accepted it as for their own good. For instance, Ma Yuan talked a great deal about this, saying that:

“In my opinion official media is more professional, which means that they report more from the perspective of our national interests. Personal media is more tabloid; they try to attract people’s attention with sensational headlines” (Interview: Ma Yuan).

“This article is posted on a blog, so it might not be true, but this article is posted on Global Times, so I can know for sure that it can be trusted. So based on this, this article is more trustworthy and has more authority than the other” (Interview: Ma Yuan).

In contrast to Stockmann’s findings, many respondents in this study expressed more distrust towards commercial media than official media. They talked about how they had become increasingly distrustful of commercialized media because of its sensational writing styles. For instance, in Yan Qing’s opinion, Sina News was often a bit too skewed for her taste, so she preferred official media because it is more formal and professional. Bo Teng also pointed out how Sina News would frequently have very tabloid titles (标题党), with a typical headline being something like “Shockingly… You will never guess what happened...” (Interview: Bo Teng). This had the opposite effect on him, making him feel uneasy and annoyed, not wanting to read the article at all, which he recently rarely did. Ma Yuan also expressed his skepticism against these trends, saying that:

“In social media, there might for instance be a company working in the background just wanting to make a big profit, so they publish fake information in order to attract people’s attention, in order to make money, or get more views. They do it in their own interest. Official media, on the other hand, they are more impartial, they just report what there is, they are

42 Stockmann found that commercial media sources were seen as reporting from the perspective of the public in a less biased way, and thus official sources were ranked lower than commercial ones (2010).
more truthful. Since they are concerned with national political issues, they will not rewrite or add anything that is not true. That is how I think it is” (Interview: Ma Yuan)

In Nathan’s study there was a complete lack of what he termed “believers” – people that accepted what they read in its entirety, but he came to the conclusion that “if official media continue to present a relatively complex and accurate view of the world, the proportions of believers in the population can be expected to grow” (Nathan 1985: ch.9). Today the Chinese media is much freer and more diverse than at the time of Nathan’s study, and even official media present relatively accurate accounts of the events reported on, even though inclined toward a pro-government agenda. Nevertheless, even though many respondents in this study trusted official media, they could not be characterized as blind believers, perhaps with one exception. One respondent, Fan Lei, had almost complete trust in official media. This trust apparently came from his complete distrust in commercial media, which he felt very alienated from. He said that he had lost all faith in the news because of its sensational way of writing, and that made him read very little news, if any he would turn almost solely to official sources. On the question on how he could know whether something he read was false or not, he said that:

“If I really want to know, I will look to CCTV or other official channels. No matter what, I believe it is true, no matter how the government handles a matter, I believe that is the correct way (...) As a Chinese citizen, I have to abide the government. The government only has good intentions and wants the best for us. We have this system, so I obey them, and I think that is for the best for the country. Should I not be guided to make a contribution to my country?” (Interview: Fan Lei)

He thought the media nowadays were misleading and consisted of too much fake news and media hypes, which prevented people from getting the information they should have. His idea about fake news consisted mainly of commercial media hypes, and he exemplified by mentioning how green beans had been reported to cure all sorts of diseases, which he, as a student of science, could not be made to believe in. He said that the current news environment had been completely spoiled by commercialization and sensational reporting trends, quoting a Chinese idiom saying that “a piece of rat feces has spoiled the whole pot of soup” (Interview: Fan Lei).

The respondents’ relation to and ideas about fake news differed in line with their levels of literacy. The accepters and some negotiators talked about fake news in a more distant sense, knowing that one had to be careful because fake stories existed, but not adept at identifying it
in practice. For instance, Li Xuan said that “I don’t think one can trust everything online, because some stories might be fake” (Interview: Li Xuan), but could not mention any examples. Many respondents also thought of fake news in accordance with Fan Lei’s example above, in which someone would try to fool them into buying a product or clicking a link. Several also thought of fake news as something their parents or grandparents would believe in. For example, Bo Teng mentioned a recent article that had spread quickly on the net, claiming a young girl in Shandong had died shortly after being infected with a deadly virus from eating fish. People were now urged to not eat fish, as the virus was spreading quickly. Bo Teng laughed and said “fake news are like this – viruses. Last time (we spoke) my mom told me about this virus, it was called SB250\textsuperscript{43} which means - I am stupid – but my mom thought it was real” (Interview: Bo Teng). The inexperienced readers did not think about the media as a political tool, and they did not seem to think that political news stories could also be twisted or contain fake elements. They felt more comfortable with making decisions without collecting further information, and trusted more their gut feeling to be the correct decision. For instance, Xue Mei emphasized that “I think it is important to follow your own feelings. One should reflect on the issue, but in the end one’s own judgments are the most important” (Interview: Xue Mei).

On the contrary, the more experienced readers were more aware of how messages might be twisted to serve political goals, pointing out how information and numbers might be manipulated. The more experienced readers were less eager to trust what they read, regardless of the source being official media, commercial media or social media. They preferred to check and collect information from multiple sources, also foreign ones, before making a judgment. For instance, Zhang Sheng said that:

“Personally I think Sina News is a bit false, so usually I only to read stories outside of the Firewall. And since I have been doing that a lot, now I do not really trust domestic media” (Interview: Zhang Sheng).

Hong Bo also pointed out how comparison of different sources was an important method for him when assessing information, saying that “In order to assess information in the media, I look at different media, I don’t read just one, and then compare the parts that match and

\textsuperscript{43} SB is short version for 傻逼, and 250 is also a colloquial term for “stupid”. To name of the news story in Chinese was “聊城一女性感染 SB250 病毒死亡”.

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mismatch” (Interview: Hong Bo). Similarly, Lin Hai mentioned how he recently had
followed up on the Sino-Korean issue and the boycott of Lotte (乐天) stores in China because
of their involvement in the THAAD deployment and accusations of corruption. He said that
recently some of his friends had published articles on Wechat urging people to boycott
Korean goods. Lin Hai did not like it when other people propagated those messages, it made
him feel uncomfortable, since they were based too extensively on emotions and not on facts.
He described how had spent a great deal of time searching different search engines for more
accurate and relevant information on the topic, in order to gain a more comprehensive
understanding of the issue. Moreover, the experienced readers knew that even though
information could be persuasive, in the end they had no way of really knowing whether it was
correct. For instance, Liu Yao said that:

“Unless I have first-hand information or have experienced it myself, it is impossible to really
know whether it is real or fake. Media reports might not be real, and moreover, media
themselves might not have the correct information” (Interview: Liu Yao).

A general point among all the respondents, regardless of experience and level of media
literacy, was that while expressing skepticism toward the truthfulness in commercial media
and social media, the majority of respondents still reported to mainly access news through
such media outlets. Most popular were secondary news sites such as Sina News, Wangyi
News or Baidu News, or they clicked forwarded links shared by friends on Wechat or
accounts they followed on Weibo or on other social media. Since such news sites (and their
respective mobile apps, which most respondents used) only have republishing rights, not
producing rights, they repost original content from both official and commercial media. Thus,
when accessing articles from such secondary sites, less emphasis might be put on the original
source. Indeed, what mattered much more for the respondents in this study was whether a
topic interested them. If it did, they would read the article, but it did not necessarily mean that
they believed in everything they read. However, while the accepters more passively waited
for the information to come to them, more of the negotiators and decipherers actively
approached information, better at filtering out unwanted and irrelevant content, and also
accessed foreign media and academic journals through the use of VPN services. They were
more open to various types of media, and could just as well read official ones, commercial
ones, or independent ones, because they had a more practical approach to the information
they encountered.
4.2.3 Message variables: Argument quality & style

Message variables refer to how the respondents perceived the argument quality and the stylistic writing style in the texts. This has already been mentioned in various places in the above sections, but deserves an additional brief summary. A first point refers to the complexity of the topic, and how that affected the respondents’ evaluation. This is linked to respondents’ different levels of prior knowledge of and interest in the topic, as mentioned in the section on recipient variables. Many respondents, especially the accepters, were not at all interested in political issues. Since they lacked experience in reading such articles, and were therefore not familiar with the writing style and the terminology used, especially in the second case article. As they did not fully understand the argumentation in the articles, it was difficult for them to make a comprehensive evaluation of all aspects and arguments. However, they still tried their best to make sense of it, but relied more on what Popkin (1991) termed “information shortcuts” and “gut reasoning”. For instance, one such information shortcut was that they tended to focus and base their judgment on the headline of the articles, and did not read the whole story. Many of the inexperienced readers preferred the first article because it was easier to read and its argumentation and rhetoric was familiar to them. They were generally unaware of and unable to escape the pull of their prior preconceptions, and thus did not question the framing and bias in the first article. Thus, their ability to critically assess the information was limited by the complexity of the issue and their prior experiences.44

The more experienced readers, on the other hand, first assessed the sources and their motives, but in the end put more emphasis on argument quality when deciding whether the information was trustworthy or not. If they found the argumentation to be honest, well-written and included different angles and perspectives, they perceived better of it. Identifying evidence in the argumentation was also important, and Liu Yao pointed out that having pictures, video, documents or other hands-on evidence or references to support an argument was important for whether he could trust the information and not. He said that “If there is real evidence, like a picture or video, then it is easier to confirm. If there is no evidence,

“people might start to doubt” (Interview: Liu Yao). In particular, he acknowledged that social news stories are easier to back up with such evidence, and that this is more difficult when it comes to political issues, because they are often more abstract. Liu Yao also talked about how he found the second article more trustworthy because of its mention of and reference to international laws and the tribunal at the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague. He thought the argumentation was good and agreed with some of the aspects pointed out by the author, and by supporting it with facts, it became more credible. On the complete contrary, Xiao Ling found this argumentation to be very little credible, as she pointed out that she did not think highly or trust the tribunal in The Hague, because it was biased with Western views. Thus, their own prior opinions and attitudes also influenced how they perceived of the argumentation in the articles.

4.2.4 Context variables: Time, setting and distractions

Finally, context variables pertain to both the case and to the interview setting. How did time and space, the interview setting and possible distractions influence the respondents’ answers and evaluation of the articles? These aspects might be more methodological, but are still worth mentioning at this point, as it is important to be aware of how such factors might have influenced the respondents – and thus the results and analysis.

First of all, the relevance of the case topic is of importance in this context. At the time of the interviews in March 2017, the South China Sea issue was not a particular hot one in the media. Had the interviews taken place at a time when the issue had been given more space and had been repeatedly reported on in the media, the answers respondents gave might have been different. As Andrew Nathan found in his study, news stories that had been repeatedly published were more persuasive for how people related to them, and more people had knowledge on them (Nathan 1985: ch.9). However, by using this topic for the case articles, it was perhaps easier to distinguish between the experienced and interested readers and the inexperienced and disinterested readers. If the topic was “hotter”, there might have been less distinction.

Next, the interview setting and possible distractions during the interview might have influenced the respondents’ answers and evaluation of the articles. All of the interviews were conducted on university campuses, but at different locations. Some were indoor in offices,
classrooms, cafés, cafeterias and restaurants, and some were outdoors, at benches, in parks, in front of the library and so on. Some respondents were perhaps not comfortably seated, or they were distracted by people walking by. In some interviews, other people were listening in on the side, and that might have induced some respondents to not answer as thoroughly and truthfully as they otherwise would have. The time available to make a decision also influences how comprehensive it will be. Some of the respondents might have felt pressured by time, and therefore did not put as much effort into really reading through and attempting to understand the case articles. They just wanted to get the interview over with, so they could continue what they were doing. Their answers might therefore be less comprehensive than if they had gotten more time to prepare and sit down properly with the texts. Thus, in order to strengthen the reliability of the study, all interviews should have been at the same location and with unlimited time available. However, that has not been possible in this study, and one should be aware that such factors might have influenced the result.

In addition, several motivational factors might impact a person’s engagement in processing a message\(^{45}\). In this context, the desire to impress others is particularly relevant. For instance, during the interviews, two of the respondents that classified as accepters at first reported to read news every day, and both answered that they enjoyed reading about political issues as well as entertainment and sports related articles. One of them, Yue Hong, claimed to be particularly interested in territorial disputes, even though she later in the interview did not seem to have much knowledge about or interest in the case. It can be suspected that she mentioned it because she knew that the case articles were about the South China Sea, and she thought that this was the answer I wanted to hear. Similarly, Ma Yuan at first claimed to frequently read political news, but later in the interview stated that he was not particularly interested in or understood politics. In the beginning of the interview, a personal impression was that he wanted to show off and impress me (he also asked me on a date), but later he understood that it was a serious interview, and seemed more comfortable talking about his actual habits and opinions. Of course, this was only a personal impression. However, when interpreting the final results these aspects should be taken into consideration.

\(^{45}\) These include desire for accuracy in judgment, defense of valid judgments, and the desire to impress others (Todorov et al. 2002). See also Henri Tajfel’s (1981) analysis of the consequences of group identification.
5 Conclusion

In this study, the aim has been to gain understanding about how young Chinese make sense of political news online, within the context of an authoritarian one-party state. This has been achieved through examining a group of Chinese university students’ reading habits and stocks of knowledge about the media landscape. In the course of this study, several interesting observations have been made.

First of all, returning to the first research question, what can be said about how young Chinese citizens consume news media, based on the findings in this study? To begin with, how often respondents reported to read news differed greatly, and showed to be a defining factor in how they dealt with information in the media. Nine respondents in this study characterized as accepters, readers with limited levels of critical media literacy, which was linked to how they consumed news media. They had little interest in reading news in general, and did not pay much attention to political issues either. They reported to be more interested in entertainment, celebrities and sports related topics. In general, they read very little news at all, perhaps only once a week. They had a passive and indifferent approach to reading news, and preferred to wait for the information to come to them instead of searching for it themselves. Since they were inexperienced news readers, they did not have much knowledge about the media landscape nor about how messages are constructed and framed in the hands of the transmitter. However, they knew that the messages they got were the ones the government wanted them to have, but they accepted and approved of this, believing it was for their own good. They rarely, if at all, accessed foreign media, and were more distrustful of messages not conforming to the official policy line rhetoric.

A second group of news readers were those who classified as negotiators, having an intermediate level of critical media literacy - seven respondents in this study. They were more attentive than the accepters, reporting to read news several times a week but not necessarily every day. They were more attentive towards specific topics that interested them, often related to their own field of study. Some of them reported to read more academic articles than news, but through this they had also become knowledgeable about methods of logical inquiry as well as about the general media landscape in China.
Next, the decipherers in this study, six respondents, were those that had the highest level of critical media literacy. They were highly attentive and reported to be interested in political topics, frequently following up on recent events and developments in foreign affairs. They read news every day, and this frequent exposure had given them a keen eye for identifying framing and motives in the messages they read. Since they actively approached information, they were better at filtering out unwanted and irrelevant content. These readers also reported to access foreign media and academic journals through the use of VPN services. They had a more practical approach to the way they engaged with information, and were more open to various types of media. They could just as well read articles and reports from official media, commercial media, or social media, but were more aware of motives and did not necessarily believe what they read.

A general finding among all respondents was that they were all getting increasingly annoyed and disapproving of reporting trends in commercial media and social media. They thought commercial media was getting too tabloid and sensational, and fake news stories were in constant circulation. However, while the inexperienced readers thought of fake stories as when someone would try to profit economically, the experienced readers also acknowledged the media as a political tool. Their distrust also led them to consume media differently. While the inexperienced readers would turn to official media for what they thought were more modest and truthful information, the more experienced readers turned to foreign media.

Nonetheless, the majority of respondents still reported to mainly access news through secondary news sites such as Sina News, Wangyi News or Baidu News, or they clicked forwarded links shared by friends on Wechat or accounts they followed on Weibo or on other social media. Since such news sites only have republishing rights, not producing rights, they repost original content from both official and commercial media. Thus, when accessing articles from such secondary sites, less emphasis might be put on the original source. Indeed, what mattered much more for the respondents in this study was whether a topic interested them. If it did, they would read the article, but it did not necessarily mean that they believed what they read, and if they doubted – the inexperienced readers would turn to official media, while the experienced ones turned to foreign media. Moreover, the experienced readers were more likely to consume more of it before making a judgment, while the inexperienced ones were more inclined to trust their own initial judgment to be correct.
The second research question in this thesis asked what characterized the respondents meaning-making process when interpreting and evaluating political media messages. What influenced the way they made sense of them? While Daniela Stockmann argues that source variables (credibility & expertise) are the most important factors when individuals navigate and evaluate information, this study argues that recipient variables (interest & experience) are more important, and in turn influence how sources are evaluated and perceived of, as well as how respondents perceive of the argumentation and writing styles in the articles they encounter. It can not be taken for granted that people have a conscious approach to how they assess the information they are presented with. A great number of people are more or less indifferent to the media messages they encounter – they will neither agree nor oppose. Linking the empirical findings with the theoretical framework, this study argues that patterns of trust and distrust – how credible different sources are seen to be, are linked to each respondent’s consumption pattern and level of critical media literacy, as discussed above. Thus, personal interest and experience is key to developing and cultivating one’s critical media literacy, and in turn how efficiently one is able to navigate and evaluate media messages online.

Nonetheless, despite the assertion that these findings are valuable, there is no denying that they are limited. Further research must therefore undoubtedly be undertaken in order to gain a more comprehensive picture about Chinese citizens’ media consumption habits and their ways of dealing with and processing information they encounter in the media sphere. In future research, links between social psychology research, public opinion research, and communication theories can be further explored for their implications on audience evaluation of media messages – in particular in an authoritarian context like in China.
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Appendix 1

5.1 Case article 1: “安倍围着中国行遭敷衍，中方称其心态不健康”

原标题：安倍“围堵中国”四国行遭敷衍 外交部：日方心态极不健康

[环球时报-环球网记者 白云怡] 日本首相安倍现在正马不停蹄地扛着“大礼包”到菲律宾、澳大利亚、印尼和越南四国访问。安倍的意图很清楚，就是要在美国候任总统特朗普上台前编一张“围堵中国的网”，而这其中很重要的一点就是继续在南海问题上拉拢这几个小伙伴。不过，安倍的理想很丰满，得到的回应却非常“骨感”：在经历了菲、澳、印尼、越四国这几天不咸不淡的冷淡回应后，还被中国外交部的发言人补了最后一刀：安倍就是心态不健康！

回顾安倍的亚太之旅，那可真是为了在南海问题上再掀波涛兢兢业业、煞费苦心。在这次旅程的第一站、东盟轮值主席国菲律宾，安倍不仅主动提出，未来五年日本要向菲律宾提供一万亿美元的援助，
还表示可以为菲律宾提供导弹，结果这个提议直接就被菲律宾总统杜特尔特给否决了，回答很干脆利落，“我们不需要”。

到了澳大利亚，安倍又一直在力劝澳大利亚和日本站在一起，共同防止美国减弱在亚太地区事务的参与度，没想到澳大利亚前总理基廷偏偏在这个时候故话说，和美国在南海问题上掺和到一起，简直是“要把澳大利亚卷入和中国的战争”。

在第三站印尼，安倍不停地表示，要和印尼加深防务关系，还要支援印尼740亿日元“开发南海”，但印尼总统佐科的回应却远不如安倍那么热烈，仅仅表示印尼已经同意和日本今年在雅加达开一个外长防长磋商会议。

越南就更别提了，安倍脚还没踏上越南国土，中越两国就发表了联合公报，明确指出两国在南海问题上已达成共识：管控好海上分歧，不采取使局势复杂化、争议扩大的行动，维护南海和平稳定。

安倍辛辛苦苦地搞“地球仪外交”，却得到了这样“打脸”的结果，不知现在内心到底是何种感受？而对于中国外交发言人的“心态极不健康”的评价，安倍自己是否也该反思一下呢？

责任编辑：隗俊

5.1.1 English translation: “Abe’s containment of China is failing; Ministry of Foreign Affairs calls his mindset unhealthy”

[Global Times – Global Times reporter Bai Yunyi]: Japan’s prime minister Abe is now flying non-stop with a spree to visit the four countries of the Philippines, Australia, Indonesia and Vietnam. Abe's intention is clear, before Donald Trump takes office as president he wants to contain China through encirclement. In order to achieve this, it is essential to win allies in the South China Sea issue. However, Abe’s wishes are plentiful, but reality is bone skinny. After receiving cold responses from all four countries he visited, China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs had only one thing to say: Abe’s mindset is extremely unhealthy.

At a regular press conference held by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 16th, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying was asked to comment on Abe’s Asia Pacific travel plans. She said: “As we all see, under the joint efforts of China and ASEAN countries, the situation in the South China Sea is stabilized for the better and has returned to the right track through negotiation. But Japanese leaders still spare no effort in deliberately provoking and playing up the regional tension. This shows Abe’s ulterior motives and extremely unhealthy mindset”.

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Looking back on Abe's Asia Pacific travels, it is clear that Abe painstakingly did everything in his power to gather support on the South China Sea issue. On the first leg of the journey, to the Philippines (which currently holds the post as of the ASEAN presidency) Abe proposed that not only will Japan provide the Philippines with aid of one trillion yen over the next five years, but will also provide missiles. But the proposal was directly rejected by Philippines president Duterte, which directly answered that “we don't need it”.

Arriving in Australia, Abe urged Australia and Japan to stand together to prevent the United States from weakening cooperation and participation in the Asia Pacific region. But Abe did not expect to hear from the former Australian prime minister Keating that “to back the United States on this issue is to directly put Australia at war with China”.

The third stop on Abe’s journey was Indonesia. Abe urged that Japan wants to deepen defense relations, and will also support Indonesia with 74 billion yen for development in the South China Sea. But Indonesia's response was far less enthusiastic, only agreeing to open up a joint foreign defense consultation chamber of commerce in Jakarta.

Not to speak of Vietnam, who is also on China’s side. Abe had not yet arrived in Vietnam before China and Vietnam issued a joint communique, making it clear that the two countries had already reached a consensus on the issue of the South China Sea. The consensus included measures to handle maritime disputes and specified that neither part should complicate the situation and should maintain peace and stability in the South China Sea.

Abe made an attempt at so-called “global diplomacy”, but he only took a beating to the face in doing so. What kind of feelings could possibly be in his heart right now? He should listen to China, which says his mindset is unhealthy, and do a serious round of self-reflection.

Editor: Kui Jun
在南海中国又上了美国人的当？

2016-07-13 13:39:14 栏目：战略智库

丁咚 文

位于荷兰海牙的常设仲裁法院就南海仲裁案专设的仲裁庭于 12 日北京时间午后发布了此案的裁决。原本就计划对此进行一个分析和评论，正好“中国选举与治理网”提出，让我点评一下新加坡国立大学法学院教授王江雨博士最近关于南海仲裁案的相关演讲，所以将两者结合起来，谈谈本人对仲裁案裁决的看法。

该项裁决首先严密论证了法庭对菲律宾起诉的南海争端相关问题进行审议和裁决的法理依据，并指出其合乎程序要求，因此具有终局性和约束力。裁决总体上符合外界预期，不利于中方对南海的主权声索。它认定中国基于“九段线”对南海拥有的“历史性权利”，没有法律依据；认定中方主张的南沙群岛相关岛礁无一能够匹配专属经济区，并可据此裁定某些海洋区域位于菲律宾的专属经济区内，而与中国任何可能的权利并不重叠；认定中国在南沙群岛相关海域的人工岛屿建设、妨碍菲律宾的捕鱼和石油开采及未阻止中国渔民在该区域的捕鱼活动等行为，违反了菲律宾在其专属经济区享有的主权利，并进一步认为中方执法船的执法行为“非法地”造成了严重的碰撞危险；认定中国在南沙群岛的建设活动，对海洋环境造成了严重损害，并在中国渔民采取对海洋环境造成严重损害的方式进行捕捞的过程中，知情而不阻止，违反了其相关国际义务；认定中方近期在菲律宾的专属经济区内进行填海造岛活动不符合缔约国在争端解决程序中的义务，并破坏了部分争端南海岛礁自然状态的证据。
这些认定符合王教授关于此案“输的可能性是很大的”展望，不过需要稍微提出的是，可能还在很大程度上超过了他的判断或愿望，他原本期待仲裁案的裁定对太平岛和“九段线”的说法作出例外处理。

我认为，王江雨教授的演讲特别重要的一点是，比较系统和深入地了解了南海主权之争的历史经纬和现实情况，在对一些问题进行分析和研判时就令人感觉很扎实，很有说服力。这大概是一些学者认为它的这篇演讲在目前的流行观点中“最中肯”的原因所在。

我对王教授这篇演讲中提到的两个观点特别赞同。一是他认为在南海问题上美国从很早开始就在“下—盘很大的旗”，二是他认为，南海的主权争端就目前来看，对中国来说并非那么重要，如果因此搞坏了与周边国家的关系，非常不必要，得不偿失，也影响其在亚洲的长远目标。他的这两个观点跟本人可以说是不谋而合的。

第一个观点，实际上反映了中美战略规划和对外关系决策的差异。美国拥有丰富和成熟的政治外交和处理地缘政治关系的经验，同时也拥有完备、科学、健康的决策及咨询体系，智库向政府和公众提供了源源不断的思想和理论。美国的立法和行政、政府、情报系统和智库在国家重大问题决策上形成了相互制衡、相互促进的体制和体系，这就避免了决策和规划中的“长官意志”泛滥和决策失之于随意、短视和无效的倾向。美国有条从它决策介入亚太事务开始，就系统地规划其在东亚的政策和策略，并逐步实施。

但大陆在处理对外关系特别是地缘关系时，既缺乏具客观性的科学而独立的理论与思想指导，在决策体制方面又实行党委中心制，立法机构、智库未能在重大问题决策中发挥应有作用，在很大程度上说还停留在长官拍脑门决策的原始阶段，即令有些参与机制，也是流于形式，没有实际内容的。比如我对大陆的智库有一个基本的评价，认为这些智库的学者主要做的事，一是解释上意，以圆其说；二是揣摩上意，迎合建议。至于原因，你懂的……这样的智库就发挥不了美国智库所能发挥的作用，而且会误导国家的大政方针走向“异化”和扭曲。

所以，决策体制的因素是造成中国对外政策失误的重要原因之一。在中国决策和规划，远远落后于美国的情况下，就很容易被其牵着鼻子走，比如王教授提到，在当年的中菲海上对峙中，后者接受美国的建议，主动退出对峙并随即向海牙的国际仲裁法院提出了诉状。这可能是美国整体战略的一部分，甚至可以说，中国是上了美国人的“当”了。这就源于中方的决策体制没有美国的发达。

王教授的第二个观点，在我看来，就是中国领导层没有全面有效地权衡当前各种利益及其关系，正确厘清国家战略的优先次序。南海相关岛礁的主权争议对于中国当前的核心利益来说，是局部的非中心的利益。什么是中国的核心利益？中国虽然在经济上取得了一定进展，成为全球第二大经济体，但跟西方相比，无论是经济、政治、社会、文化都还比较落后，所以，实现全面发展，并推行其在外在保障——和平的外部环境，是当下中国压倒一切的核心利益。任何其他利益都要为之让步，在当前正处于危机边缘的中国，集中精力解决发展的问题尚且不够，哪有余力和资本跟周边国家斗？何况，要维持中国的可持续
发展，在亚洲推进经济一体化，建立共存共荣的经济体系，是一个具长远价值的方向性课题，怎可因南海疥癣之患，让区域所有国家与中国离心离德？

我还要在这里强调的是，以国内思维处理对外关系，是南海仲裁案后应当反思的另一个焦点问题。现存国际体制是二战特别是冷战结束后，在美国主导下建立起来的。国际法和国际规则是既定的，中国没有能力改变它们，却欲将自己的那一套强加于人，在国内行得通，但在国外却是注定要碰壁的。国际关系体制也好，外国也好，是不可能吃中国的这一套的。你说要维护中国的“合法权益”，这个法是什么“法”？不就是现有的“国际法和国际规则”嘛。

你从一开始就断言“不参与，不接受”，到后来又增加了“不承认，不执行”，在外界看来，你无视甚至蔑视它们十分看重的国际法、国际规则，又如何依靠它们来保护自身权益？你说要和平崛起、和平发展，与周边国家搞好关系，通过国与国的双边谈判和平解决争端，但你整个过程中都是采取军事手段、军事方式去应对，如何取信于人？到了最后，裁决公布了，你又大谈和平，那么之前在南海大张旗鼓地调动军队进行部署，算怎么回事？这就让人摸清了你的底牌，至少在眼下，你不敢真硬，真打。所有这些，可以相信都是在美方的规划和预测中的。美国就是如来佛，大陆再怎么折腾都逃不出它的手掌心。

再回到裁决本身。五个“认定”一出，中国可谓满盘皆输。中方诉求的核心依据，包括历史性权利和九段线之说，被予以否定，等于否定了中国在南海的有关主权。中国在南海的活动是非法的，是对菲律宾主权的“侵犯”。这些结果，都是根源于中方单方面决定不参与仲裁案，而仲裁案决定一作出，就是不可改变的，就成了既成事实。

中国如何面对？有人说要强势反击，有人说要兵戈相向，但中国古人说得好，师出有名。按照国际法，你的主权是不合法的，以何理由这么做？全世界都会反对你，除非你有足够的钱去摆平所有的国家。那么最后，你只能变相接受结果，吃个哑巴亏。

5.2.1 English translation: “Is China being deceived by the United States in the South China Sea?”

Author: Ding Dong

The Permanent Court of Arbitration in Holland, Hague, issued a verdict in the afternoon of June 12, Beijing time, regarding the South China Sea arbitration. In this article I plan to conduct an analysis and commentary, discussing the Chinese government reaction, as well as commenting on Dr. Wang Jingyu's speech about The South China Sea arbitration at the
National University of Singapore’s School of Law. Combining these two, I will reflect on my opinions on the arbitration ruling.

The ruling first discusses the legal basis for the court’s consideration of the South China Sea dispute in Philippines and pointed out that Philippines meet the procedural requirements. So the ruling is final and binding. Overall in line with external expectations, there is no legal ground for China to claim sovereignty of the South China Sea. The ruling points out that China’s claims on the “nine dash line” in the South China Sea, and a “historic right” to this area has no legal basis. It finds in Spratly Islands can not be included in China’s exclusive economic zone, and accordingly ruled it to be within the exclusive economic zones of some marine areas in the Philippines. It does not overlap with any right of Chinese. The ruling also points out that China’s construction of artificial islands in the Spratly Islands waters are hindering Philippines's fishing and oil exploitation and non organizational behavior in the region. Moreover, Chinese fishermen’s fishing activities are in violation of the sovereignty of Philippines in its exclusive economic zone and also finds Chinese law enforcement ship’s behavior illegal because of its serious risk of collision. China’s building and fishing activities around the Spratly Islands are also causing serious damage to the marine environment, and are in violation of China’s international obligations. The ruling finds China has recently identified the exclusive economic zone in Philippines within the Island reclamation activities do not comply with the State Party in the dispute settlement procedures and obligations therein, and destroy the natural state of evidence of disputes in the South China Sea Islands.

Based on this, one might agree with Prof. Wang on the idea that China has "lost a great possibility". I think Professor Wang Jiangyu's speech is a particularly important, as it is a more systematic and in-depth understanding of the history and reality of the sovereignty of the South China Sea. When analyzing and judging some of the problems regarding this case, I find his conclusions to be solid and persuasive. In particular, I agree with two aspects pointed out by Prof. Wang in the speech. First of all, when it comes to the issue of the South China Sea, the United States has, from the very beginning, also been playing a great game of chess. Second, he believes the current situation and the question of sovereignty of the South China Sea dispute to indeed not be so important to China. China will not to destroy the relationship between neighboring countries nor make this issue affect the long-term (economical) development and interaction in Asia. The two views of his and my point of view can be said to be the same.
The first point actually reflects the differences between Chinese and American foreign relations, strategic planning and decision making. The United States has abundant and mature foreign exchanges and geopolitical relations experience, and also has a complete, scientific, healthy decision-making and decision-making consultation system. Think tanks provide new ideas and theories to the government and the public. The United States’ legislation, administration, government, information systems and think tanks in major national decision-making form a system of checks and balances, a mutual promotion system, and it avoids the decision-making and planning to be too random and short-sighted. These conditions have made the United States' involvement in the Asia Pacific and their East Asia policy more systematic and gradual.

On the contrary, in China’s dealing with foreign relations, especially geopolitical relations, lacks both objectivity and scientific guidance of independent theories and ideas, and instead implement the party central system, decision-making system in legislative bodies. Think tanks fail to play a role in the major issues in decision-making and planning. To a great extent, think tanks also remain in the original stage of the executive head decisions. Participation mechanisms are all a mere formality, and not actually enforced and put into action. For this reason, think tanks cannot play the roles of American think tanks, and will mislead the national fundamental policy to be alienated and distorted.

The decision-making system is one of the important reasons Chinese foreign policy mistakes. In the China decision-making and planning is far lower than the United States case. For example, Prof. Wang mentioned that the Philippine received recommendations from the United States, and then put forward the initiative to withdraw from the confrontation petition to the International Court of Arbitration in Hague. This may be a part of America's overall strategy, and even can be said that China was deceived by the United States. This is because the Chinese decision-making system cannot compete, and is not as developed, as it is in the United States.

Prof. Wang's second point of view, in my opinion, is Chinese leadership isn’t balance of interests fully and effectively, and also didn’t clarify national strategic priorities. The South China Sea Islands Sovereignty Dispute related to the core interests of the Chinese, is the non local center of interest. What is the core value of the China? Although Chinese in economic
progress, become the world's second largest economy, but compared with the western countries, whether economic, political, social, and culture is relatively backward. So, to achieve comprehensive development, and maintain its security: a peaceful external environment, is the core interests of the overwhelming. Compared to it, any other interests are not important, which is in crisis Chinese, are not enough to concentrate on solving the problems in the development, no extra strength and ability to fight and neighboring countries. How to maintain the sustainable development of Chinese, promote economic integration in Asia, the establishment of coexistence and common prosperity of the economy, is a long-term value of the direction of the subject. How could the problem because of the South China Sea area, let all countries with China disunity? I would like to stress that the domestic thinking of dealing with foreign relations, is a focus problem of reflection should be the South China Sea after arbitration. Now the international system is the Second World War, especially after the cold war, established in the United States under the auspices of the international law and rules are determined, China don’t have the ability to change it. China will own a strong on others, maybe in the domestic work, but is doomed to run in a foreign country. Whether it is the international system, or in other countries, it is impossible to believe china. China say that it wants to maintain Chinese “legitimate rights” and interests of the law. What is this “law”? Is that the existing international law and international rules?

China’s way of handling the situation was to “refuse to participate”, and “refuse to accept”, and then “not recognizing” and “not taking action”. From the outside, you disregard and even contempt for international law. Indeed, they are very important international rules, how can rely on them to protect their own interests? China claim to adhere to peaceful rise, peaceful development, and good relations with neighboring countries, as well as peaceful settlement of disputes through bilateral negotiations. But, when China is also taking use of military means to deal with issues in the South China Sea, how are people going to believe that?

When the final decision was announced, China spoke of peaceful development and interaction, and did not mobilize troops to be deployed to the South China Sea. This will let people know China’s true face, at least for now, China can and will not fight. It is all in line with the perceptions and plans of the United States. The United States is Buddha, and China has no way to control the United States.
Returning to the decision itself, China can be said to be the loser. China core claims, including historic rights and the nine dash line were all denied, tantamount to denying the China’s sovereignty over the South China Sea. The Chinese’s illegal activities in the South China Sea was found to be a violation of the sovereignty of the Philippines. Because China refused to participate in the arbitration, the results are like this. Now the ruling is made and cannot be changed, to China’s loss.

How will China face all this now and in the future? Some say that China will make a strong counterattack, while others say that China will solve the problem through going to war. According to international law, China’s sovereignty is not legitimate, so how to do that with reason? With the rest of the world against you, unless you have the money to settle it, you can only accept the silence.
Appendix 2

5.3 Interview guide

Part 1: Media habits
How often do you read news online (if any)?
你多常在网上看新闻吗？
Where do you most often read news? Why is that so?
在网上读新闻的时候，这些新闻在哪里找到的？比如说报纸网站，微博，微信群，博客，其他网站等等。为什么？
What kind of news do you follow/like to read?
你关注什么样的新闻？你对什么样的新闻有兴趣？为什么？

Part 2: Media environment
In your opinion, what is the current media environment in China like? Why? What types of media exist?
中国媒体环境怎么样？为什么是这样？中国媒体有什么不同的类型？
What do you consider to be the role of the media?
你认为媒体有什么任务？有什么职能？
What is the relationship between media and the government?
你觉得传媒与政府的关系如何？
What does it imply to be objective? How would you personally define it?
在媒体中，你认为客观性是什么？你个人说明一下，怎么下定义？

Part 3: News evaluation
What are these articles about? What/who do they represent?
这篇报道是关于什么？代表什么／谁？利于谁？
What is your response to the articles? How do you feel after reading them?
看着这篇报道以后，你有什么反应，有什么感觉？
What do you think about the quality of the articles? Are they good articles? Why (not)?
你觉得这篇文章的质量高不高？为什么？
What is the wording in the articles like? (Follow up on specific terms) Why do you think the author chose these words?
报道的措辞用语如何？为什么？

What can you say about the sources? Are they reliable?
关于报道的来源，你可以说什么？你认为这样一个来源可靠吗？

How can you tell whether the information is correct or not?
靠什么知道消息是否正确的？

What motivations do you think the author/source has for writing the article?
你认为来源有什么动机写这篇报道？

Do you consider the articles to be objective? Why (not)?
你认为这篇报道的立场客观吗？能够公平吗？为什么？

Do you consider the articles to be trustworthy? Why (not)?
你认为是否值得信赖？为什么？

Are you proud of being Chinese? What makes you proud?
你个人为当作一个中国人民感觉自豪吗？为什么？在哪一些方面？
5.4 Information and Consent Form

信息和同意书

关于该项目：
我是浙江大学和奥斯陆大学的研究生，我的专业是中国社会和政治。我写的论文是关于杭州大学生的在网上读新闻的习惯。因为您在杭州上大学，所以我有兴趣采访您。采访的内容就是关于您的读新闻的习惯，也会给您看两篇报道。问题都是比较简单的，关于您个人的观点。

采访的时候会音频录音，可能也会记笔记。

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如果您对该项目有任何问题，请联系我：Linda Hjelle 琳达
电话号码：186 6813 8565，电子邮件：lindahjelle@outlook.com

我已收到有关该项目的信息，并要参加，我也同意采访应以音频录制

(签名，日期)

年龄：

共产党员：□是 □否

专业：

□本科 □硕士

大学：
5.5 List of respondents

The respondents are anonymous, and their real names has been changed into random names for this thesis. In the table, media literacy categories are operationalized as: Accepters = A, Negotiators = N, Decipherers = D.

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### 5.6 Translated quotes

**Xue Mei**

**English translation:** “It’s because of the headline. I don’t know what to say, but I just feel like it is not a very formal title, it is just for attracting people’s attention, it is not objective”

**Chinese:** “就是感觉不是那么正式性的标题，一看就是那个很吸引人的标题，也没有，就是想让人知道为什么又上了美国人的当就是很吸引人的，所以我觉得这个不是客观性的”

**English translation:** “I think it is important to follow your own feelings. One should reflect on the issue, but in the end one’s own judgments are the most important”

**Chinese:** “我觉得按照自己的想法来吧，你看他就是你觉得自己的想法还是很重要的，然后就是，关键是自己的想法是重要的再看他们的文章，然后思考一下，但是自己的想法还是最重要”

**Li Xuan**

**English translation:** “I don’t have any particular feelings after reading it, political issues are not easy to understand”

**Chinese:** “没有什么观后感，政治上面的问题不怎么容易理解”

**English translation:** “I don’t think one can trust everything online, because some stories might be fake”

**Chinese:** “我觉得网上的一些东西并不是什么都可以信赖的，可能它有一些是假的报道出来的”

**Chun Hua**

**English translation:** “For me this is all just words, when I read it I feel a bit awkward. I don’t have any particular reactions to it. Girls are not interested in such political or historical issues”

**Chinese:** “我觉得这些都是字，看起来有点呆板，看起来没有什么兴趣，女生对这种政治不感兴趣的，对历史也不感兴趣”
**Lin Hai**

English translation: “Just because I read a lot, that does not mean that I understand everything. That is the thing with news, they are basically just pieces of information. But I enjoy reading about these things”

Chinese: “会常常看新闻，也不是说看新闻一定要看懂什么东西，就是新闻嘛，一些消息而已啊，挺喜欢看这东西的”

English translation: “News articles are not only found through mobile apps, I can find news in so many other places, at any time I want. I don’t need those apps, because my own news reading abilities are high, I can look for them on my own”

Chinese: “因为新闻不只是可以通过 APP 来看嘛，就是可能我对新闻的东西我随时随地都能看到新闻，就是说我不一定需要通过 APP 来看，因为我自己的新闻阅读量是很大的嘛”

English translation: “they all duplicate each other, echo what others have said”

Chinese: “因为像是那种关于国家大事的新闻话，大家的方针方向啊，都是雷同啊，类似的对不对”

**Yan Qing**

English translation: “to look at an issue from an outside perspective”

Chinese: “我觉得从一个局外人的角度去看事情”

English translation: “It is not supporting China, so it is not objective. It feels like it is a bit too inclined to defend foreign views”

Chinese: “会带些不太那么维护中国的的色彩，不太那么客观的色彩，就有点维护国外的感觉”

**Xiao Ling**

English translation: “it is favoring China, always saying that China is right no matter what”

Chinese: “第一篇报道我感觉是比较站在中国方面，给我的感觉就好像全部都在说中国好啊，观点比较单一，就是属于现在经常看见的那种报道”
English translation: “It is more objective since it not only discusses the good points, but the bad ones too. It points out the ills of the times, that is why it is better”

Chinese: “那第二篇到这个时候我觉得都比较客观一点，不仅能谈到好的地方，也能谈到坏的地方，就是针砭时弊，就是比较好”

**Zhang Sheng**

English translation: “Personally I think Sina News is a bit false, so usually I only to read stories outside of the Firewall. And since I have been doing that a lot, now I do not really trust domestic media”

Chinese: “不过我个人觉得新浪新闻有点假，一般我自己看的话都是翻墙出去看的。主要是翻了很多墙，所以对国内媒体不太相信”

**Liu Yao**

English translation: “Before, when I read articles like this, I would become angry and ask “why is Japan doing that? But then I realized that this is what the government wants us to read, it is not necessarily completely true (…) Many people are like that, they think that everything China does or stands for is correct and true, but they don’t look thoroughly at the facts. Instead people should think about such issues long-term, and do what is most beneficial for the country on the long run”.

Chinese: “我是拿我现在的自己跟以前的我去对比。以前的我看到这些的时候，我会感到很气愤，为什么别人会这样，为什么日本会这样？然后我会去评论这些。但是在后来我感觉，有时候媒体报道的东西是它想让你看到的东西，它并不一定是完全的事实，而且在考虑这些问题的时候，有两种不同的态度。一种就是反正是利于中国的就是对的，再一种就是我们要为长远的国家利益去考虑啊这些”

English translation: “when I read such news now, I remind myself to look at them rationally, but eventually it just came to that I rarely read this kind of news”

Chinese: “我觉得我现在去看这些问题的时候，我会提醒自己，要理性看待这些问题，到后来就是变成我很少看这些新闻了”
English translation: “In theory, objectivity is that which is based on absolute facts, but in reality, there is no such thing, because who is to decide what is the correct way and what is not? That is impossible to solve”

Chinese: ”客观性我认为第一点，假如说评论某一件具体的事情，应该是建立在绝对事实的基础上，但是这一个事实，由谁来说它是真实的还是假的，这个很难决定”

English translation: “Unless I have first-hand information or have experienced it myself, it is impossible to really know whether it is real or fake. Media reports might not be real, and moreover, media themselves might not have the correct information”

Chinese: “我不知道当时发生的事情的细节，我没法判断这件事情是真的还是假的，因为一方面媒体它不会按真实的方面去报道，再一方面就是媒体自己接受到的信息也不一定是真实的”

English translation: “If there is real evidence, like a picture or video, then it is easier to confirm. If there is no evidence, people might start to doubt”

Chinese: “一个视频摆在这，我们都可以看到，那么我们可以确定它是个事实，但是如果单凭文字去描述，说服力不是特别大，别人都会怀疑这个事情的真实性”

**Fo Han**

English translation: “about these viewpoints, I won’t agree but I won’t oppose either. I just accept that some people have opinions like this. That’s it. It is all fine”

Chinese: “我会提取一些信息，对于他的一些观点不会赞同，也不会反对，就觉得既然有人是这样的，那好吧”

English translation: “it has a very difficult language, and it is about politics, which I am not interested in. It just makes me confused”

Chinese: “专业词汇也比较多，是那种政治方面的，不是我很喜欢的类型，所以看的时候就感觉你在说什么？就有一点晕，我真正记住的没有多少，我也不知道它到底说了些什么”

English translation: “Official media is the voice of the state; the voice they want us to hear. If they want you to know about it you will know about it, but if they do not want you to know
about it you will not know about it”

Chinese: “国家媒体要发出国家的声音，就是国家想让你听到的声音，有一些他想让你知道的就会让你知道，不想让你知道的你是知道不了的”

Zhu Yi

English translation: “In fact there is no such thing as objective media, because all and every media have self-interests and values. Even those who claim to be independent and impartial actors, their personal background and experiences will influence their reporting of an issue (…) there is no such thing as absolute objectivity”

Chinese: “说实话没有一个媒体是客观的，每个媒体身后所牵涉的利益，包括就算是自恃为很公平的媒体人，他对任何事情的看法都与他自身所处的环境有关系，所以客观性的话其实对一件事物的看法，在这件事情以外所有的客观性我觉得都是基于当下的情况和自身利益来讲的，没有绝对的客观”

Hong Bo

English translation: “objectivity is to not discuss politics, to be completely free”.

Chinese: “不谈政治，一切自由”

English translation: “Within the framework of the current media environment, as long as you do not breach the norms it is fine, it is free, but you have to keep within this frame”

Chinese: “媒体环境在一个框架之下，只要大家都不犯规，相对来说比较自由的，但是前提是你必须在这个框架之下”

English translation: “He is trying to convey a neutral and objective attitude, by letting the readers know that he is analyzing the issue from a neutral point of view. But in reality the opinions he is expressing are not neutral at all (…) It is because his position and ideas favor the West”

Chinese: “第二篇他想持一种中立的态度，他想传达给读者这种我想站在中立的角度去批评双方去陈述这个事实，但是实际上他表达的观点并不是中立的（…）可能是偏向于西方的一些立场和观点”
English translation: “In order to assess information in the media, I look at different media, I don’t read just one, and then compare the parts that match and mismatch”

Chinese: “最可靠的方式是我看一些不同媒体对同一件事情的论述，然后找到他们共同和不同的部分”

Hui Zeng

English translation: “the real facts, in a timely manner, to include everything”

Chinese: “真实、及时、全面的报道”

English translation: “there are no particular motives”

Chinese: “他们应该没有什么动机吧，这我并不能看出什么”

English translation: “Global Times is our official media, so I trust them”

Chinese: “作为环球网应该是我们国家媒体，所以我信赖”

Shi Lei

English translation: “it is solely the Chinese side speaking, and even as an opponent Japan is not put in a justifiable light, it feels like they are trying to smear them”

Chinese: “因为第一个感觉就是中方，不是把日本作为一个名正言顺的相对应的对手来看的，就感觉是一个丑化它的东西”

Ma Yuan

English translation: “the first article is more objective, since it is about politics from a government perspective, so it is inclined to support China’s self-interests”

Chinese: “说实话啊，这个报道比之前来说会客观一点，为什么呢，因为这是国家政治方面，他要很客观是不大可能的，他会向一边倒向国家自己的利益，所以多多少少是主观的，但是相对来说还是比较客观的”

English translation: “this article is saying that Abe’s actions are not very good, but it is not favoring anyone, it is just pointing out that some of Abe’s actions are not very good”

Chinese: “有益于谁啊？~这个，恩~，这篇报道又好像说安倍不好了，这篇报道好像就
说安倍一些做法不是很好，但是他并没有利于谁吧，他只是指出了安倍一些做法不是很好”

English translation: “good, the wording is alright, it is well-written and precise”
Chinese: “还算专业的吧。还可以，还行，还是比较严谨的”

English translation: “they just want to let the people know about what is going on”
Chinese: “写这个动机嘛我觉得一个肯定是给国民看的，还有一个环球网也肯定是给全世界的人看的”

English translation: “In my opinion official media is more professional, which means that they report more from the perspective of our national interests. Personal media is more tabloid; they try to attract people’s attention with sensational headlines”
Chinese: “在我看来国家媒体更专业一点，就是从国家利益出发的更多一点，他的报道更多是从国家利益出发的，那个人媒体的话可能就是标题党更多一点，就是说他这个标题打的很好吸引人家，个人媒体主要吸引点击量”

English translation: “This article is posted on a blog, so it might not be true, but this article is posted on Global Times, so I can know for sure that it can be trusted. So based on this, this article is more trustworthy and has more authority than the other”
Chinese: “你看你刚才问的中国人又上美国人的当是个人微博上的，所以我觉得不一定是真实的，但是这篇在环球网上发的，能够在这上面发说明有一定的权威性和可信度，所以我觉得这篇比我们之前提到的可信度和权威性高一点”

English translation: “In social media, there might for instance be a company working in the background just wanting to make a big profit, so they publish fake information in order to attract people’s attention, in order to make money, or get more views. They do it in their own interest. Official media, on the other hand, they are more impartial, they just report what there is, they are more truthful. Since they are concerned with national political issues, they will not rewrite or add anything that is not true. That is how I think it is”
Chinese: “可能一个公司为了生存他可能要求他利益化最大化，他可能一些报道相对来说可能会有一些虚假，为吸引点击量会有假的报道，就是说他为了盈利，别人看的多
Yue Hong

English translation: “China is a one-party state, and thus the government should control the media. But the government should also give citizens freedom of speech”

Chinese: “我认为大众传媒应该是政治传播的爪牙，中国是一党专政，政府应该掌控媒体。但是政府也要给人民一定的言论自由”

Li Li

English translation: “The media’s function is to provide the news to its citizens, and the government’s function is to filter out information that is inappropriate, in order to protect us”

Chinese: “大众传媒的功能就是将新闻、信息等日新月异更替的东西传递到大众的眼界中，而政治的作用就是将一些不合时宜，不恰当的东西从这些信息流中过滤到，以达到保护我们的目的”

Bo Teng

English translation: “At least it points out existing problems, to let us know that China’s diplomacy in the South China Sea is not entirely as smooth (as they want us to believe). There is definitely something to it, but one cannot fully trust it”

Chinese: “第二篇我也不知道能不能信赖，但是至少指出了问题，所以就不能完全觉得中国现在在南海上的外交是很顺利的。这篇这么说这些肯定也是一些事实，但是不能完全相信”

English translation: “I feel like this is very partial, and there must be more information that they are avoiding or not providing”

Chinese: “感觉比较片面，应该还有别的信息没有写出来吧”

English translation: “Shockingly… You will never guess what happened…”

Chinese: “新闻的标题都会变得很让人难受，比如说 “震惊 XXX，结果竟然是这样……”。我看了就很不想看，最近是这样”
English translation: “fake news are like this – viruses. Last time my mom told me about this virus, it was called SB250 which means - I am stupid – but my mom thought it was real”

Chinese: “假的新闻有什么病毒，上次我妈给我看一个病毒，它的名字叫“SB250”，SB就是笨的意思，250 也是，我妈就以为这是真的”

Fan Lei

English translation: “If I really want to know, I will look to CCTV or other official channels. No matter what, I believe it is true, no matter how the government handles a matter, I believe that is the correct way (…) As a Chinese citizen, I have to abide the government. The government only has good intentions and wants the best for us. We have this system, so I obey them, and I think that is for the best for the country. Should I not be guided to make a contribution to my country?”

Chinese: 如果我真的要去管，我会去找中国官方或者是央视的新闻，电视上的新闻都是经过筛选的，不管是怎样的，我就信他是真的，不管政府怎么样处理过这个事情，我就信他是真的 (…) 因为作为一个中国人，有些时候服从政府的舆论导向是我作为一个公民应该做的事情，因为政府做这个事情对我们国家好，我们这种体系，我服从他们，我觉得对国家有好处，哪怕受一些引导又怎么样，难道我不应该受一些引导去为我的国家做贡献吗？”

English translation: “a piece of rat feces has spoiled the whole pot of soup”

Chinese: “但是因为一些少量假信息的存在，中国的古话“一颗老鼠屎坏了一锅粥”，导致没有发挥应有的信息传播效果”.